

Rome and Jerusalem

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It's not easy being Jewish. Not only do we attract odium—political, religious and social—out of all proportion to our size, but we are divided amongst ourselves to an incredible degree. Just think of the issue of Jerusalem and peace with the Palestinians. There are clearly no easy answers. There are enormous risks and a seemingly total absence of trust between the rival factions within and without. The Winograd report highlighted internal failures. Rockets raining down daily on Israeli schools and homes underline the external threat! It feels like most of the world would like us to simply disappear and this would solve all problems.

It has always been thus. There is nothing new under the sun. Our miraculous and almost illogical survival seems to be the only fixed point and common thread. Yet we always have been and remain excessively self critical. Is this bad? Maybe it's what gives us a moral edge!

History fascinates me, if only because we stubbornly refuse to learn its lessons. Professor Martin Goodman of Oxford has written many books on ancient Rome and Judea during the Roman occupation and destruction. His latest is "Rome and Jerusalem", much of it a restatement of earlier works such as "The Ruling Class of Judea". He attempts to answer the question as to why Rome turned on Judea with such violence and aggression. Rome was challenged elsewhere in the Empire and it was usually ruthless when it could be, but the viciousness of its campaigns in Judea was quite exceptional.

Throughout the Empire, the Romans, like the Greeks before them, tended either to ignore local cults or respect them. Perhaps this was a way of covering their bases. In Judea, Romans, even the Emperors from Rome itself, regularly sent sacrifices to the Temple. So religion does not seem to be the issue.

There was constant commercial and social tension and rivalry between Jews and Greeks throughout the Empire and clashes occurred frequently. But, again, this does not fully explain the Judean experience. Through a detailed analysis of sources, Goodman comes up with two principal answers.

First there was Vespasian, one of a generation of generals who vied for succession after the end of the Julian line of men descended directly or indirectly from Julius Caesar. All his rivals had won significant military victories. He had not. So a crushing, brutal campaign in Judea, continued after he returned to Rome by his son Titus, was essential to his claims. He had to be seen as outstandingly tough and the Judean Campaign happened to coincide with this moment in history.

Secondly, in all other areas the Romans relied on the local wealthy and upper classes to run the provinces, and often rewarded them with high office, even becoming senators. But in the case of Judea, the Jewish upper, aristocratic, priestly classes were not only divided, incompetent, and incapable of ruling,

but they allowed such a wealth gap to open up between them and the masses that they only made matters worse and Judea ungovernable. The Romans also made the mistake of assuming the High Priest could function as an effective ruler when there were too many competing and more effective power structures. In particular, as anti-populists, the Romans were reluctant to recognize the power of the more democratic Assembly of Rabbis.

Our main sources remain the Jewish renegade Josephus, notoriously unreliable and self-justifying, the Talmud, written later and a vehicle of the rabbinic tradition, and the Gospels, written in an alien language by people who claimed to be Jewish but probably were not, and with an obvious anti-Jewish agenda. Naturally I am biased in favor of the Talmud, which presents three approaches, two of which support the Goodman thesis. One is that Jewish leadership indeed failed, as illustrated by the famous story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. Here's my adaptation of the Talmud in Gittin 55b:

A man in Jerusalem was friendly with Kamtza, but the enemy of Bar Kamtza. He told his assistant to invite Kamtza to a feast, but instead he invited Bar Kamtza. When he saw him sitting there he said, "You are my enemy; leave." Bar Kamtza said, "Let me pay for what I eat and drink, but do not embarrass me in public." He refused. So Bar Kamtza offered to pay for half the banquet. Still the man refused. Then he offered to pay for the whole of the banquet, but still he was forcibly ejected. Bar Kamtza said to himself, "The rabbis were there and did not protest. They must have agreed with him [they all deserve what's coming]. I will go and 'chew the cud' with the Romans." He went and told them the Jews had rebelled against them.

This failure of human sensitivity, the reluctance of the rabbis to tangle with a wealthy man, the absence of moral leadership, the bitterness and the betrayal, led ultimately to the destruction of Jerusalem. The legend condemns the arrogance and insensitivity of the rich, the inability of the rabbis to take a moral stand, and the divisiveness and personal interests that overrode national considerations. Nothing better illustrates the disastrous incompetence of the ruling Jewish classes.

The Talmud sees the collapse of moral society as a religious failure. According to Shabbat 119b, most Jews had abandoned their religion, education had ceased, charity was the exception rather than the rule, and people were too arrogant. Throughout the Talmud there are endless examples of the ostentation of the wealthy. But equally, the Talmud blames wider external social and economic tensions, and this is from Megillah 6a:

"If you hear that Jerusalem is settled and Caesarea destroyed, or Caesarea settled and Jerusalem destroyed, you may believe it. But if you hear they are both destroyed or both settled, do not believe it!" (Never mind that by the time the Talmud was compiled they had both been destroyed!)

In other words, the factors we can point to nowadays as exercising a negative influence on Jewish life, and specifically on life in Israel—failure of moral leadership, wealth playing a corrosive role, corruption internally, external hatred and ideological conflict, religious hypocrisy—were all present then. Add to this external political exigencies and power politics and you had disaster then and potential disaster now. The only reassuring factor is that, somehow or other, we survive, our talents and drive win out in the end despite everything, and, I am sure, with a little help from Our Friend.