

Home Alone

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have always reveled in being different and felt privileged to enjoy the different worlds I have lived in and drawn inspiration and strength from. Of course it has been at a price. That price is a sense of alienation from everything that speaks "conformity". As I look back, I regret nothing. I was never attracted by communal affairs, only education. I have turned my back on the petty, unforgiving world of religious politics and have not identified with any specific political wing of Israeli or world Jewry. I believe it is this that has kept me a happy man, enjoying my work and retaining my enthusiasm.

But on the other hand, this sets me apart and even alienates me from much of the People to which I outwardly belong. The idea of "The Jewish People" has never been as significant to me as loyalty to its values. Looking in at Anglo-Jewry from the outside, I saw nothing I could identify with. And when I got to know different communities around the world, with their splits and factions and turf battles, I always felt the ideas of Jewish togetherness, of "all Israel is responsible for each other" (Midrash Rabba, Shir HaShirim), to be rather hollow.

Have Jews ever been united? It might just have been that way once but only fleetingly, at certain rare moments where external circumstances dictated it. Otherwise we have always fragmented. Oh yes, there are wonderful exceptions, religious and otherwise—but they are indeed exceptions.

I like the different communities and their specific cultures and traditions, Sefardi, Ashkenazi, Hassidic, Lithuanian, mystic, rationalist. I can pray and feel at home in an Iranian or a Hassidic service, so long as the people concerned care about what they are there for.

When I look at what I actually have in common with other Jews, it is not that much. There is the old joke that anyone less religious than you is an assimilationist and anyone more religious is a fanatic. What do I have in common with those who have no religious animation at all? Is it race or genes? Unlikely. A sense of peoplehood? What does that consist of, bagels and lox? A sense of shared alienation? I share that with plenty of others. What have I in common intellectually with Jews who have no open intellectual sense of wonder? I am not motivated by the same goals as those who make money a major criterion of self-worth, or of judging others. And what about those religious Jews who hate the very idea of the State of Israel? Not me. I am not much interested in power, authority, religious one-upmanship, or miracle workers.

If we look at the Jewish world—with all its fractions, varieties, orthodoxies and heresies, different lands of origin, mother tongues, and political loyalties—it is amazing that we consider ourselves a people altogether.

Now with the situation in Gaza I suddenly feel part of the Jewish people. I do not like alienated secular Jews who want Israel to conveniently disappear. I do not support rabid settlement policies, certainly not hordes of wild young fanatics wreaking damage and injury to make their point. I pray for peace, a peace with equality and tolerance and fairness.

But I would not for one moment want to make peace with people I cannot trust to deliver. I despise corrupt political structures, and nationalism strikes me as dangerous. Yet if nearly everyone else in the world can have a homeland, why can't we? And when, as now, I see the massive choruses of hatred, I feel the need to reinforce my Jewish sense of belonging to a dispossessed people. When I see young Israeli soldiers going to war, I cry. When I see the casualties of war on both sides, I am appalled and deeply troubled. And I can recognize that on the other side Muslims will feel their solidarities as I feel mine. We pray three times a day for peace, but peace seems to have taken flight. The numerical and military odds look frightening long term. But neither do I believe it is lost, nor do I believe in giving up. That is the paradox

I never liked the idea that only adversity keeps us Jews together. If it was the only reason then it would be a crushing condemnation of our religion and its culture. It is a like a marriage held together only because of financial convenience. Yet it is adversity that tests loyalty, that divides those who are committed to a people from those who ultimately are not.

Those of you following the Torah reading will be noticing how the sons of Jacob were divided—competing, argumentative, looking for others to blame, rivaling for leadership, and frankly an example of discord, even if later commentators claimed it was all in a spiritual cause. Yet they came together to meet the crisis of the various threats that Egypt posed.

That is us! A crisis tests loyalty, but the bigger test is whether there is anything deeper lying beneath the surface waiting to be awoken.