

What is a Jew?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In the hurly burly of political conflict, abuse is common. Friends fall out and identities are tested. Boundaries of loyalty are stretched and sometimes broken. The current situation in the Middle East is a perfect example of a crisis that tests the strongest of bonds. No Jew of any morality or sensitivity likes to see casualties, innocent or otherwise. Our religion demands that we recognize the suffering even of our enemies. We search around desperately for solutions, for different ways of doing things. We feel helpless bystanders, not always knowing the full story or what other options there are. We are disturbed by seeing hatred, hearing illogical and prejudiced opinions. Propaganda, political posturing, and preconceived positions are the enemy of reasoned debate or possible solutions.

We Jews are divided into a number of camps. At two extremes of the spectrum are Jews who are unreservedly and unquestioningly supporters of whatever Israel does, and those who are implacably opposed to Israel's existence. The middle includes those who are committed to Israel but question its military tactics and policies, those who are committed to Israel's right to self-defense and believe that deterrence is the only option under present circumstances, and all points on the spectrum in between those four positions.

Included in all these positions are religious Jews of every shade and secular Jews of every degree. Both extremes detest each other, yet will admit to being part of the same people, the same culture, and the same ethnos, if not the same religion.

It is an amazing feature of us Jews that from the moment Moses took us out of Egypt, it seems we have not all agreed on anything religious or political. Yet somehow, against the odds, we have survived and kept on coming back from the brink. We have clashed with every major civilization we have encountered. We have conflicted with every major power block at one time or another. I honestly believe our survival is a miracle. I do not believe in proofs of the existence of God (I think that is an oxymoron by definition—how can anything not physical in any way be proved using material methods?), but if ever there were proof, the survival of the Jewish people, a few million facing billions of enemies, must be it!

So what is it that keeps us together and what is it that defines us all? Wherever we are we are the archetypal outsiders. We are there, but we are not completely there. Christianity thought it had replaced us and we were condemned to be the wandering outcast Jew, and we were for a long time. There was no good reason for Judaism to survive, they thought, now that Christianity had replaced the Old Israel with the easier more convenient New. If we did survive it was a reproach, "stubborn Jewry". Changing times and ideas forced the Christian world to tolerate us, sometimes even love us, but not really accept us.

Islam, too, thought it had replaced Judaism and by rights we ought not to continue. Mohammad, like Luther after him, initially welcomed us as allies and possible converts but turned against us when we refused the invitation. There were odd dynasties who embraced us, but only so long as we knew our place. Similarly, new nation-states, in their struggle to establish national identities, found no place for Jews, and so "modern" anti-Semitism added a layer to the old. We just did not belong; even if we were given citizenship, it was with reluctance, either because we were useful or because of external pressure. Even conversion did not help. The Inquisition hunted Marranos, Jews who had converted, more aggressively than Jews who stayed Jewish. The English Prime Minister Disraeli was excoriated as a scheming Jew till the end of his days. The composer Mendelssohn was accused of spreading of corrupt Semitic music. Both men were converts to Christianity.

We were a Marxist danger to Capitalists, Capitalists to Marxists, Westerners to Easterners, and Orientals to Occidentals. And all this, simply because we survived, and we did indeed include all of these within our ranks. Our behavioral religion helped us adapt and we managed to put roots down regardless of the host society's religion or politics. We were indeed the universal scapegoat, the universal oddball, the universal outsider. And that helped us survive, too—the fact that we could take a step back and have a different perspective, the fact that we were always being moved on and had to prove ourselves. The fact that we always had challenges to overcome has made us struggle all the harder. If there is any genetic bonus to being Jewish, it was because we had to survive and Darwin was right. The fittest survive! We have fought consistently above our weight. We have had our share of crooks and saints, of Nobel prize-winners and Ponzi schemers.

In the end there is a common thread, a common unifying factor; it is this sense of belonging to an unwanted and suspect people. With it you are a complex bundle of contradictions always trying to reconcile different values and cultural strengths, but at least if you have a positive religious component this compensates. It gives one a sense of pride and spiritual direction. Those whom we call self-hating Jews are those with nothing to make them feel good about their Jewish identity.

We are hurting at the moment because we feel our alienation for different and conflicting reasons. But it appears that God thinks that sometimes we have to! If one wants to find a common denominator it is that Jews do not entirely fit in anywhere, even amongst Jews. We are archetypal outsiders, even when we think we belong. Most of the world is against us. Some Jews think deservedly so, others do not. But those who hate Jews make no distinction. That is what being a Jew is like.