

Censorship

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have always hated the idea of censorship. It never really works. As Proverbs says, "Food eaten in secret always tastes better." Nothing encourages evil more than publicity, and nothing gets a film or a book more attention than being banned. If that was true a thousand years ago, it is exponentially more so now in our era of social media. It's much more difficult to hide anything nowadays, from ideas to money. But there are other reasons. Censorship, banning, often has consequences that are totally unforeseen.

There's a book that came out in Israel some eleven years ago called "The Censor, the Editor, and the Text" by Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin. It shows how the Catholic burning and censorship of Jewish books in the sixteenth century actually had the opposite effect of what was intended. Its central thesis is that the efforts of the Catholic Church to suppress Jewish documents actually strengthened Jewish identity, reinforced its opposition to Christian ideological assaults, and also spurred it into dealing with modern ideas. The struggle for the Jewish soul under these conditions also involved alienation from traditional Judaism and the Jewish community. Large numbers of Jews either defected or identified with other systems. We think this is something new, but it has always been a feature of Jewish life, and its effect is to only strengthen those who stay.

Christianity always had a problem with Jewish refusal to accept it. It tried as hard as it could to convert the Jews, and when it failed it resorted to restriction, compulsion, persecution, and murder. The picture was not always consistent. Certain popes, monastic orders, and clergy proved more zealous and aggressive than others. Only economic necessity ever blunted the edge of the wars against the Jews. From Carthage in 250 until the Arab states in 1948, Jews have been expelled from 109 states or countries. But the burning of Jewish books, mainly the Talmud, began in Paris in 1242 at the instigation of a renegade Jew, Nicholas Donin. Jews or ex-Jews were invariably behind the ideological persecutions.

All authoritarian bodies tend to want to restrict information available to the public. The printing press made books accessible to wider audiences. Already in 1479 Pope Sixtus IV demanded ecclesiastical censorship. But the challenge of Martin Luther brought out the best and the worst in the Catholic response. The Inquisition was established in 1542, and the Index Librorum Prohibitorum (the Index of Prohibited Books) came in 1559.

Catholicism responded by trying to recreate a purer, more effective religious response. Commonly known as the Counter-Reformation. Monastic orders and Jesuits strove to outdo each other in their zealotry. The Council of Trent introduced a massive purge of what were seen as dangerous heresies. Those that stemmed from Judaism were regarded as the most dangerous. Judaism did not suffer alone of course. They start by attacking the Jews and then they

attack their own. The Galileo affair perfectly illustrates the self-defeating policies of the Catholic orthodoxy of the time.

Initially the campaign against the Jews involved burning its books. Almost three quarters of all Hebrew books written and printed in Europe were either destroyed or confiscated. The Jews responded by having more copies of its core books printed beyond the reach of the Inquisition. But the Church also initiated a formidable campaign of censoring and altering Jewish texts, whether the Talmud, commentaries on the Bible, polemics, or prayerbooks it considered offensive to Christianity or heretical. A specific publication was issued, called Sefer Hazikkuk, which gave detailed instructions on what to look out for and how alterations had to be made in order to satisfy the censors before a text could be released.

There were unintended results from this. One was that in order to better understand Jewish texts, the censors employed learned Jews to work with them in deciding what words should be removed or replaced with others. This actually gave both work and recognition to Jewish scholars. Having to read more Jewish texts in detail, some Christian scholars developed a greater understanding and respect for the Jewish religion and its ideas. And Jews themselves turned increasingly to alternative and often mystical texts such as the Zohar, which were not considered to pose such a threat.

Great Christians like Johan Reuchlin championed the Talmud against venal ex-Jews like Johannes Pfefferkorn who demanded its total destruction. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola argued that the Zohar reinforced Christianity. Censorship in fact strengthened Judaism by extending the range of the books that actually became available even in censored editions to Jewish readers.

Most surprisingly censorship also caused Jews to examine their own attitudes and to modify extreme negative and xenophobic sources. But it also accelerated the split within Judaism between those who wanted to preserve its authentic integrity and those who, on the other hand, either preferred to expand the process of cutting things out of the tradition or wanted it to meld with the mindset and values as those of the dominant Christian world.

What interests me, and is so relevant now, is that the campaign to censor or "update" Jewish texts was aided and abetted by Jews who had converted to Christianity, who psychologically probably needed to prove themselves holier or had to assuage their guilt and wanted to see Judaism disappear. And also by Jews still within Judaism who wanted to change Judaism to be more like the dominant Christian world around them. In other words, just as today, many who campaign against Jewish cultural or national autonomy are often Jews who have abandoned Judaism, or those who resent the increasing orthodoxy and strength of its religious mainstream and seek to ameliorate or change it. In so doing, they ally themselves with forces that, for all their disguise, are inimical to Jewish survival.

The trouble is that all this achieves is to force many of those loyal to Judaism to focus exclusively on its survival and to become even more inward-looking. Force, aggression, and antagonism often have effects opposite to those intended.