

Goyim

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Here is a thought for the 9th of Av and, more importantly, for life afterwards, as many of us venture forth into a different, holiday world.

The term *Goy* is biblical. It applies to any nation, including the Israelites. Only much later did it come to have pejorative associations. But recently I have heard that there are those who disapprove of using “non-Jews”, because, apparently, it implies superiority. Some prefer the word “gentile” which I always thought the was pejorative. The truth is that there are many different terms for Jews. Sons of Jacob, Children of Abraham, Israelites, Hebrews, Judeans, Jews, Semites, not to mention Kikes, Hebes, and Red Sea Walkers. I guess it all depends on intent.

There are still some who interpret the biblical statement “a kingdom of priests and holy nation” (*Goy* is the word used to describe the Israelites there) as implying that we think we are better. Different, perhaps. But certainly not intrinsically or necessarily better—as our prophets keep reminding us.

In the present increasingly abusive climate, in which the term Nazi can be applied to anyone you disagree with politically, I also keep hearing such lines as, “Well, I don’t know what the Jews are complaining about. Their God commanded them to exterminate whole tribes, men, women, and children.” And yes, I agree it doesn’t look good. George Steiner in his play *The Portage to San Cristobal* envisions Hitler arguing with Israelis who found him in the Amazon jungle, that he learnt about genocide from the Bible. Even if it was three-and-half thousand years ago. And think of Syria today, whose evil leader, that the United Nations still accords respect and status to, thinks nothing of torturing and killing children, women, and men simply because they disagree politically or religiously. And obnoxious Central and South American tyrants. Drug gangs, even in the USA, kill men, women, and children so that they will neither testify nor live to avenge.

But yes, in the primitive climate of kill or be killed that existed in biblical times, one had to be prepared to fight or die. The Torah only selects certain specific Canaanite tribes for such harsh treatment, because they represented an existential threat. Morally, as much as physically. The general rules of the Torah were to offer peace and submission as an option. And despite the biblical commands, it is clear the Israelites did not carry them out enthusiastically. Most of the specific tribes continued to coexist for at least 700 years after the initial invasion. Which is why many scholars think that these commands might have been written retroactively. Others regard them as metaphors or conventions of the times.

It is true that Biblical Law, following earlier prototypes, provides protection and privileges primarily for its own citizens. Even so, it welcomed strangers who respected its civil laws and gave aliens and slaves

paths to citizenship and conversion. The Torah command to be kind to strangers and to be charitable to them because of what the Israelites had suffered is repeated more than any other.

Even so, since the Torah had been given in a protective, primarily agrarian and primitive world, 2,000 years ago the rabbis of the Talmud realized that circumstances were changing. They began to expand the laws relating to other peoples. Whereas the Bible was reacting to a pagan worldview, times had changed. Greece, Persia, and Rome now added more moral and philosophical dimensions to their codes. The Talmudic Seven Commands to the Sons of Noah (based on a biblical text) was a way of laying down a very basic moral code that differentiated those living to certain moral standards from those who did not, and according them respect, protection, and interaction.

New concepts, such as *Darkei Shalom* (do things that make peace between peoples), *Mishum Eyva* (avoid offending other nations), *Yishuv Medina* (international relations), *Yishuvo shel olam* (benefit all human beings) as well as *Dina De Malkchuta* (respect for other legal systems). They all modified earlier restrictions and encouraged respect for those who were not part of the Jewish community. As the Talmud says (Gittin 61a) "We must provide for the poor of the non-Jews along with the poor of the Jews; visit the sick of the non-Jews along with the sick of the Jews; bury the dead of the non-Jews as well as the dead of the Jews, in order to encourage peace (*mipnei darkhei shalom*)." All this at a time when Jews, Israelites, or whatever they were called, were under constant assault, in their homeland and beyond, from rivals and oppressors.

There is no doubt in my mind that 2,000 years of suffering has given us Jews a huge chip on our shoulders. If the whole world seems to hate us, and if the world stood by when the Nazis almost succeeded in exterminating us, why should we care for the non-Jew, or however we describe her. This is an argument I have often heard. Yet it was not made when the whole might of the Roman Empire and its Greek commercial satellites united in despising and persecuting us. It was not made in Medieval Europe during the crusades or in Persia when the Jewish community was all but destroyed if not forcibly converted.

The Holocaust was indeed unlike any previous horror. And it showed how easy it can be to bring out the inhuman in humanity. I and many others include it in the personal and national suffering the 9th of Av reminds of. But we believe that all humans can rise as well as fall. And the Talmud happily uses good non-Jews as examples we should follow, too.

That is why it is so necessary, on Tisha B'Av and beyond, to remember the righteous gentiles, those people who in every generation have supported us with great risk to themselves. Those with whom we have had and do have good relations, in the past and the present, in almost every country and in every religion. It is too easy to hate, to perpetuate hatred. And if there are those who wish to destroy us, we must fight back but not let that destroy our sense of humanity and the realization that we have as many friends in the world today as we have enemies.

And as we travel from our home bases and mix with all kinds of people we might not normally, it is important to remember that we are all God's children.