

Blame the Jews

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Every year when we come around to reading about Joseph and his brothers, I am reminded of a part of the Yom Kipur Ashkenazi service. In particular, the poem *Eyleh Ezkera*. Most of the poems, *Piyuttim*, were composed in medieval times. They are usually repetitious, veritable puzzles of references, associations and quotations. Not to mention that they stretch out our services beyond forbearance. *Eyleh Ezkera* is one such. But it is also beautifully crafted and very moving. The author and date are unknown.

For over ten years now I have spent Yom Kipur with my Persian community. *Eyleh Ezkera* is not in our Yom Kipur liturgy. Although some say it on Tisha B'Av. But it is so moving that when there is a break in our service, I say it then.

Eyleh Ezkera is based on a series of Talmudic narratives about rabbis who were martyred during the Roman occupation of the Land of Israel and wars against the Jews. Somewhere between the first century and the end of the second. Although the ten martyrs mentioned in the poem lived at different times, they are brought together in the text, for heightened impact. So that it is clear that the unidentified ruler is a Roman. And as the Roman Empire metamorphized into the Christian Holy Empire, the poem was in all likelihood written while the Crusaders murdered their way across European Jewry.

The anonymous ruler in the poem seems to have studied the "Old Testament" and Jewish Law. Which also hints at the various medieval disputations Christian monks imposed on the Jews. Where they often used Old Testament texts to try and prove that they were right and Judaism wrong. The only consequence that made sense to them, was for the Jews to convert. And the more Jews resisted, the more they were hated. Sadly, the same thing happened under Islam too, though not quite as often.

In brief, the story of the poem is that a non-Jewish ruler has read the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. He then calls in the rabbis and asks them what Jewish Law has to say about a kidnapping. The rabbis reply that it deserves the death penalty. He then says that as the original guilty parties are no longer alive, and the rabbis are descendants of Joseph's brothers, they must pay the penalty and die. The rabbis seek to understand God's intentions and the reply they get is that they must accept the Divine Decree. All of them are put to death cruelly.

In some ways, this story about a non-Jewish ruler and a biblical text is reminiscent of another Talmudic story. When Alexander the Great passed through the Middle East, the non-Jewish peoples surrounding Judea, all appeared before him with claims against the Jews based on Biblical texts. For example, the Egyptians wanted the gold and silver back, that the Jews were given when they left Egypt. The Jews argued that then they would claim much more compensation for all the years of their unpaid slavery. The Egyptians

ran out of the court in disarray.

Hatred of Jews is an ongoing pathology spanning the centuries. Attempts were always made to use Jewish texts against Jews to show how malevolent they were. Many of the attacks on Jews came from other Jews, whether apostatized or not. As indeed is the case today. Atheists often use biblical texts to show how primitive and dangerous Jews are. George Steiner wrote a play in which Hitler claims that Israelite massacres of Canaanites were a model for his genocide. And Israeli Shlomo Sand has argued that there never was a Jewish people. We have always had our home born detractors. The most famous Jewish anti-Zionist, Noam Chomsky may be over the hill, but he still has plenty of acolytes.

In 1963 I spoke in a debate at the Cambridge Union in the UK that sought to condemn the establishment of Israel. I said that for generations in every country Jews had been told to go home. In my hometown of Wallingford, Jews had lived there in the thirteenth century until they were expelled at the request of the local population. And now eight hundred years later local yahoos would often shout at us as we walked through town "Yids go home." Yet when in fact the Yids did try to go home, they were being told to go back. We won that debate. But the old tropes have never ceased in Britain and now are back in fashion.

I mention all this because the disease of anti-Jewish hatred has never gone away. It merely lies dormant like cancer in remission until some new set of circumstances allows it to break out again. Not that I am either surprised or particularly worried. Just amazed at human stupidity and prejudice. What makes Antisemitism unique is that it is shared by the lowest and the highest of classes. The brute thugs and the super-sophisticated intellectuals.

The United Nations General Assembly's "Fourth Committee," which is also known as the "Special Political and Decolonization Committee, supposedly represents "the World." This past week it passed nine resolutions condemning Israel alone. Neither they nor the mainstream media seem at all concerned that 500 rockets were aimed from Gaza at civilian communities in Israel. Or that instead of using aid from Arab countries (with Israel's support) to help the poor and unemployed, Gaza prefers to use it to buy arms.

Jews are made to feel uncomfortable across the University Campuses of the world. Simply because they support Israel as a Jewish homeland. This anti-Israelism remains the one common cause that seems to unite right and left and is now spurred on by new generations and new opponents. On many university campuses, professors select Israel above all other nations for condemnation. They often try to marginalize or block Israeli students and lecturers on their campuses. And refuse to give recommendations to American students who want to go to visit or study in Israel. Various civil protest movements have extended their campaigns beyond local issues, to try to exclude Jews for supporting Israel. This is the rise in anti-Semitism that does not get reported.

Instead, the Left-Wing media and some Jewish organizations revel in hyping attacks on Jews that come from the lowest levels of society. Most of the

assaults of Jews in Brooklyn are by young black thugs who are just as likely to attack each other. Swastikas are usually the handiwork of white supremacists, not known for the sharpness of their thinking or their sanity. Farrakhan has been around for a long time. So has David Duke of the KKK. There is indeed a rise in Jihadi violence. But most Muslims in the USA just want to live in peace and earn a living.

In the USA, in general, the majority live in peace. Occasionally violence erupts as it always has. But more often than not, it comes from those who are mentally disturbed. The USA was born out of violence, guns and protests. Yet most of us, white, black, Catholic, Muslim manage to get on. That does not mean the animus and prejudices of all sorts are not still alive.

We have fooled ourselves if we thought that antisemitism had disappeared. And if the left wing of the Democratic party achieves dominance, you can be sure it will increase. As we say at the Passover table "In every generation, people try to destroy us and yet we survive because God saves us." Which is all well and good but as a child, I always used to wonder why God put us in this position in the first place. Could someone else not have been chosen? The irony is that anti-Semitic acts sort out the goats from the sheep. Those whom it makes stronger and those who chicken out (to mix my metaphors and creatures).

Joseph did his best for Egypt and averted a catastrophe. The good things he did were soon forgotten. Using him as an excuse to attack the Jews reminds us that a place that was good for the Jews turned into one that was not. We must not let this happen again.