

# Kurds

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Kurds have been treated disgustingly. Like Israel, they are both a religious and secular ethnic group which stands outside the official Christian or Muslim world. They are neither Sunni nor Shia. They are sandwiched between Turkey or Iran, who cannot abide the fiercely independent Kurds. And like the Israelis, they are divided, fractious and argumentative.

Ever since the British created an artificial state of Iraq, the Kurds have been forced to live under Arab domination. They too have always dreamed of a State of their own. And when they volunteered to fight against Isis, they had every expectation that their sacrifices would be rewarded. Instead no one supported them when they overwhelmingly voted in a referendum for an independent state in 2017. Once again politics won!

And now the USA has thrown them under a bus, withdrawing from Syria leaving their militias exposed and at the mercy of the Turkish megalomaniac, anti-Semite, Erdogan who has been killing, torturing and oppressing the Kurds simply because they want recognition of their separate identity. And I was disappointed that Israel hasn't done more to help them. Perhaps it will come out one day that Israel and the USA did in fact, come to some agreement.

Get out of Afghanistan I say. No one wants the USA to be there except for a few corrupt Afghani politicians. Pakistan is constantly undermining the USA who has treated them with kid gloves. They haven't even released the doctor they have imprisoned for daring to help the USA find Osama Bin Laden. And I don't know how the Taliban is any worse than the raving fanatics in Pakistan itself. Far better to arm and support the Kurds as a buffer and ally.

Why is it that Jews (and Israel) seem to have a special affinity with the Kurds? Is it because we inevitably side with the underdog? With someone surrounded by enemies and who struggles to preserve its different identity as we do? Or is it because we do actually have a historical affinity with the Kurds?

The area that we now call Kurdistan was actually the core of the old Assyrian Empire. The one that carried off the Ten Tribes from the Northern Kingdom of Israel two thousand seven hundred and thirty-five years ago? Some say the Ten Tribes were completely assimilated into Assyrian society and the Kurds are descended from them. There is some literature to support this theory. The Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela (died in Castile 1173), for example, who visited them, thought that had not the Byzantine Christians forcibly converted one half of them and the Muslims the other, they would still be Jewish. He detected several customs they all adhered to that could only have come from us.

Assyria looms large in the Bible. After it conquered the Arameans of Damascus who had ravaged the Northern Kingdom for years, they then turned their

attention to the Kingdom of Israel. First, they bullied King Jehu into submission and finally conquered it in 722 BCE.

They then turned their attention to the southern Kingdom of Judea and besieged King Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage" according to Sennacherib's stele. The Bible tells us that the Assyrians withdrew but Hezekiah was forced to pay tribute nevertheless. Sennacherib, the one Byron describes as coming down "like the wolf on the fold" retreated home and set about building a new capital called Nineveh (where he was assassinated by his own sons). The ruins are to be found outside Mosul. They survived two and half thousand years. But now most of it has been destroyed by those modern barbarians called ISIS.

The Assyrians finally fell afoul of the Babylonians. As the Tanach tells us Nebuchadnezzar exiled the aristocracy of Judah to Babylon in two waves. Jehoachin first and then the rest after Zedekiah rebelled in 586 BCE. Unlike the Assyrians they encouraged the Judeans to create their own community. Nebuchadnezzar's successor Evil Merodach even restored king Jehoachin to lead the community.

The Babylonians, in turn, capitulated to the Persians whose king Cyrus let some Jews return to Jerusalem. But they ran into trouble with the Samaritans who said that this was their land now and the Israelites could jolly well go back to Persia and complain to the UN (or something like that). But we persevered! Ezra and Nehemiah came, re-built the Temple and re-established a vibrant Jewish community in which tribal differences mattered less. That did not stop them arguing the hell out of each other. All the Israelites came to be known as Judeans, or Jews. And we hung in there until the Romans decided otherwise.

There's an important lesson we learn from the Assyrians that we repeat every Yom Kipur. When we read the book of Jonah. He was told to go to Nineveh to get them to repent their evil ways. He didn't want to go because he knew that if they did repent, they would be used as a tool to destroy his country, Israel.

That was why he fled to Tarshish a well-known port to the North that was in the hands of the Kittim, the enemies of the Assyrians, the Sea People from Crete and islands around. A storm and a fish intervened. And Jonah did end up in Nineveh, where he started preaching. Whereas no one in the Jewish kingdom took him seriously, the Assyrian King listened. Hence the well known phrase "There's no prophet in his own country."

They repented. And then proceeded to destroy the Northern Kingdom. But the chronology is confusing. We have no accurate information about when Jonah lived if he did at all. His name Jonah Ben Amitai translates "The Dove (of Peace) the son of Truth"! The lesson is clear. God does not support Israel if they misbehave. He will use some other power to destroy her. So He must have thought reasonably highly of the Assyrians. Perhaps they were not brutal, greedy conquerors, but in fact, had a higher standard of morality than the Northern Kingdom.

I have often wondered if one of the reasons the Book of Jonah tells us that

the Almighty did not want to destroy Nineveh was because that was where the exiled Ten Tribes were living or would in the future! Or that the reason why the whole city listened to Jonah and repented, was because so many of them were moral Israelites who had fled from their own corrupt kingdom. Who knows?

What is certain is that much of the Assyrian population ended up with a lot of Israelite blood and somewhere in our genes, you and I may have a physical reason for wanting to see the Kurds survive. At least nowadays if the Turks, the Persians and the Iraqis try to destroy them, they have somewhere to go!

And Israel should learn the lesson and not rely overmuch on others. The only people we can really rely on, are ourselves.