

# An even worse mess

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

On the Seventeenth of Tammuz, we began the period known as the Three Weeks that culminate in the fast of the Ninth of Av ( this coming Wednesday night). After Yom Kippur, it is the most significant of our fasts. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed twice, first by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and then by the Romans in 70 CE. And, sadly, we brought the catastrophes upon ourselves through political and ethical failures.

Two weeks ago I wrote the First Jewish Kingdom was a mess, the second Commonwealth was an even bigger one.

There was a period, 2,400 years ago under the Persian empire, when Jewish life in Babylon and the re-constituted Judean State was stable. In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great passed by Judea and went on to Babylon. Alexander, like Cyrus, did not care about what gods his subjects worshipped. Most of his subjects were happy to put his effigy in their temples. The Jews of Jerusalem got around this when Simon the Just, one of the last members of The Great Assembly, is said to have begged Alexander to make the Jewish Temple an exception. Alexander agreed and, instead, all Jewish boys born that year were named after him. Myth or not after Alexander died things went rapidly downhill. His empire was carved up amongst his generals. The Judean State found itself caught between the rival Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria.

In the absence of a king, the Judean High Priest was recognized as the head of the community. Money and politics could buy the High Priesthood. The priests became a wealthy aristocracy. They were the internationalists. They built circuses, theaters and held nude Greek style athletic games. The rabbis, loyal to the law, were more nationalist and concerned with the poor as well as the rich. These two groups became, over time, the rival Sadducees (family of Zadok) and Pharisees (Separatists).

In 200 BCE, Ptolemy of Egypt had control over Judea in what was a golden period. Under him, Judeans established a large community in Alexandria. He was responsible for having the Torah translated into Greek, the Septuagint. But, in 198 BCE, Judea fell to the Seleucids. Rival priests, Onias (Choni), Jason (Joshua) and Menelaus competed, bribed, and schemed to become High Priests. One priest, Onias 4<sup>th</sup>, was so disgusted that he went down to Egypt and set up a competing Temple at Leontopolis in the Nile Delta.

This state of shifting alliances went on until Antiochus 4<sup>th</sup> of Syria in 168 BCE decided to crush Judean culture and independence. The first step was to defile the Temple. That was where the Chanukah story began. Resistance to Greek culture and Syrian oppression was initiated by a country priest, Matityahu. His son Judah (who took the name Maccabee, the Hammerer, but whose dynasty was known as the Hasmonean) led a revolt and in 165 BCE, managed to wrest the Temple from the Syrian Greeks – although the Syrians held the citadel in Jerusalem. For Judah, this was a limited victory of opportunism. Internal divisions amongst the Syrians hindered their campaigns. In 162 BCE, Syrian general Nicanor attacked with a major army. Judah, in desperation, sent emissaries to Rome to ask for protection. Which is how Rome came to see Judea as its protectorate. It was too late to help Judah. In 160 BCE, he was killed in battle. Rome would not officially recognize independent Judea until 139 BCE.

Judah's brother, Jonathan, took over. But he was soon assassinated by priestly rivals. Simon, his brother (141-135 BCE), was the first of the Maccabees to become a King as well as High Priest. But, he too was assassinated – by his own son-in-law! His son, John Hyrcanus (135-104 BCE) was a fighting man. Although he initially lost to the Syrians, eventually he expanded Judean territory to its maximum extent since Solomon. He also indulged a passion for forcibly converting non-Jews.

His son, Judah Aristobulus, was a nasty piece of work. He jailed his mother. He killed some of his brothers. Thankfully he died after a year and his wife Salome ( Shlomzion) took over. She freed the family and restored peace. But then she made a bad mistake. She married Aristobulus's brother Alexander Yannai and unfortunately, she handed him the throne. He was another warmonger who also hated the rabbis whom he either killed or exiled all except for the top one, Simon Ben Shetach who happened to be Salome's brother. In Yannai's day many Judeans, fed up with corruption and Yannai's paganism, fled Jerusalem and established the communities we now know as the Dead Sea sects. Yannai drunk himself to death (or it might have been Covid19) in 76 BCE.

Salome came back to power. She made peace with the surrounding powers and restored rabbinic authority. She ruled till 67 BCE. But then she just made her (second) big mistake. One typical of Jewish mothers – to trust her two sons, Aristobulus the Second and Hyrcanus the Second, to run the country after her. Yet for all that, she was by far the nicest, most respected, and loved of the Hasmoneans. If only more women had been able to take over, they couldn't have done a worse job than the men.

But the nice Jewish boys ushered in an unparalleled period of in-fighting, corruption, incompetence, and murder. It was so bad that Pompey (another one) had to intervene to restore order. He conquered Jerusalem (63 BCE) and

installed Hyrcanus. But when his back was turned brother Aristobulus got hold of him and castrated him so that he couldn't be the High Priest. Nice! Ptolemy kicked out Aristonolus appointed Hyrcanus ruler to compensate together with an Idumean-forced convert, Antipater, to act as caretaker. When Antipater died, his son, Herod, who had cultivated the Roman aristocracy took over. He bumped off any remaining Hasmonean males, married the last Hasmonean princess, Mariamme, and then promptly killed her.

Herod was not a nice guy, and he hated rabbis too. Even so, the Talmud credited him for rebuilding the Temple. It is his wall that we can still see today. He was the last strong ruler of Judea. After he died, in 4 BCE his incompetent son could not hack it. Rome was forced to send in procurators, with absolute power to deal with the religious, and political chaos. It did not help that they were sadistic, corrupt human beings. They were really responsible for provoking rebellion.

The leadership in Judea was split into rival camps and religious sects all competing with each other. Some wanted to fight the Romans, others wanted to negotiate. The Monty Python "Life of Brian" which you can get on Netflix, brilliantly if humorously portrays the chaos the Judeans inflicted upon themselves. Plus ça change.

Rome finally decided it had enough. It was worried the chaos would spread. Vespasian and his son, Titus, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple (70 CE) and ravaged the land. After the conquest, the Judean population was decimated and exiled. A remnant was left under Herod's sons, the Agrippas. But this was the death knell of Judean independence. But the nationalists did not give up. The Bar Cochba Revolution against Rome sixty years later was put down harshly and cruelly by Hadrian and he scattered the Jews around the Roman empire. Fortunately, the Persian community survived and thrived.

I am struck how the religious situation in Judea during those days had something in common with the Jewish life in our times! The nineteenth century gave Jews wonderful opportunities they had not had for a very long time. Many of them leapt at the chance of abandoning their religion for Western culture – just like the Judeans in Greek and Roman times. A smaller amount clung on to their religious commitment in various ways.

If you count political success as a criterion, we were no "Light Unto the Nations". But then all the powers and civilizations who came afterwards also fell apart through infighting and bad decisions. We did not bring the world to perfection. But neither did those who claimed they would do a better job. It is only our spiritual and intellectual legacies that live on. And if we

have survived two thousands of years of exile to come regain our homeland we certainly cannot put it down to anything other than a miracle. Which is why some think we should stop fasting. But I think we still have plenty to be sad about.

Today, Israel shows all the characteristics of the two previous failed attempts at self-rule. It is fractured and dysfunctional. Yet, somehow it survives and thrives. The Ninth of Av on July 30<sup>th</sup> (starting the 29<sup>th</sup> in the evening) is precisely the time when we need to think about our history and try to do better. I love history. But we never seem to learn from it. That is why we still fast.

If you want to read more on this topic, I recommend Martin Goodman's "a History of Judaism."