

Kristallnacht

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The 9th of November was the anniversary of the Kristallnacht attack on the Jews of Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland in 1938. The Nazis unleashed a hugely popular, pogrom that murdered nearly a hundred Jews and injured thousands. They destroyed 267 synagogues, and seven thousand businesses, and homes. Some 30, 000 Jews were arrested, most of whom were never heard of again.

The official excuse was that a young Jewish student in Paris, Herschel Grynszpan had heard that his parents had been expelled from Germany to Poland. But they were stuck in no man's land unable to enter Poland and distressed. In desperation, Grynszpan shot a Nazi diplomat in Paris. The news came as the Nazi leaders were convened in Munich. Goebbels immediately called on all Germans to purge Germany of the Jews and initiated a horrific medieval pogrom to purge Germany of what he called the Jewish swine. Some have said that Goebbels called the pogrom Kristallnacht, not because of all the broken glass, but because as he declared, he was now beginning to purify Germany, by removing the dirty Jews, to make it as pure as crystal! Although the attacks shocked a large number of people around the world, no one lifted a finger. There were no reprisals or condemnations. The world did nothing.

This barbarism was simply the natural result of two thousand years in Europe of hatred, dehumanization, and a church that encouraged violence against Jews. This was the norm. Of course, there were exceptions, religious and secular. But the whole of Christendom was infected with this disease of Jew-hatred.

A little historical background.

Before Christianity, conflicts between Jews and non-Jews were entirely social and commercial. Jews had held important positions and functions throughout the Roman and Persian Empires where they were free and equal citizens so long as they accepted the political authority of their overlords. They had spread all around the Mediterranean and into central and northern Europe. This all changed when in 325 CE, Emperor Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire and deprived Jews of their equality and rights. It opened them up to religious attacks and hatred. To be fair, Constantine killed far more dissenting Christians than Jews.

As Christianity grew and saw itself as the One True Faith, the narrative changed to one of a Holy War. It was directed at those who refused to join this new religion. This was now an ideological hatred, not just social or commercial. The Jews were declared the enemies of good Christians and God. They were declared guilty of *Deicide*, killing god, which remained a dogma in the Catholic Church until Pope John 23rd in 1965.

Throughout the Christian world Jews were accused of being in league with the Devil. They were forced to appear differently and live separately from everyone else. They became the scapegoats for every and any disaster. They were not just outsiders, aliens, strangers. The Church saw the refusal of the Jews to accept Christianity as an existential threat. The unwillingness to convert only added insult to injury. They tried persuasion. Disputations were held. Jews had to listen to evangelical sermons. When that failed, they tried to de-legitimize Judaism and humiliate "the stubborn Jew." So ironic because Judaism itself, did not seek to evangelize nor did it claim to be the only way to salvation.

Some rulers were more tolerant than others. Many took advantage of Jewish skills when it suited them. But most of the time they simply milked them when they could and expelled them after they had all their assets confiscated. From 700 CE there was hardly a country or city throughout the Holy Roman Empire that had not expelled or despoiled the Jews. And the remnant just moved on, from one safe haven to another.

During the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, armies heading towards the Holy Land set upon Jews as the nearest non-Christians at hand, giving them the choice of conversion or death. Many Jews even committed suicide to avoid torture and being burnt to death. Whole communities were destroyed. There were massacres throughout what is now called France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland. Whole communities were destroyed in Bern, Coblenz, Cologne, Mayence, Neuss, Nuremberg, Pforzheim, Rottenburg, Sinzig, Speyer, Treves, Weissenberg, Worms, York.

The hatred was encouraged by Barons, Bishops, Lords, and Cardinals. Names, now largely forgotten except by historians, led mobs against the Jews. Godfrey of Bouillon, Count Emicho, Peter the Hermit, St Bernard, Radulphe the Monk, Rindfleisch, the Holy Shepherd of Verdun, and Capistrano, to name only the most notorious. Even after the crusades, in the fourteenth century Jews were blamed for the Black Death and accused of poisoning Christian wells. Thousands of Jews were massacred across Europe.

One might have hoped that the Reformation initiated by Martin Luther in the

sixteenth century, would bring relief. But he too whipped up hatred against the Jews. In the Thirty Years' War between the Catholics and Protestant, Jews were expelled from Linz, Brunswick, Cologne Florence, Geneva, Halle, Lucca, Magdeburg, Milan, Moravia, Parma, Pomerania, Rome, Saxony, Thuringia, Vicenza.

Throughout all this, the Jews had no rights and were in effect the property of the princes and rulers of the multiplicity of little states and principalities. They could not own land or join guilds. The only options were trading, lending, and being middlemen. The vast majority of bankers and moneylenders throughout Europe were Christians. The Medicis, the Fuggers, the cities of Sienna, Naples, Florence, Venice, and Genoa were all heavily invested in finance and lending. But Jews traveled, they interacted with locals far from the big cities. They had relatives in other countries they could call on and trust. As kings needed money, they often found local Jewish sources cheaper and easier to default on. They could cancel debts and confiscate property from the small Jewish lender. Jews were caught in a vice and suffered both from those above them and those below. Like agents and tax collectors they were unpopular.

Of course, I must not generalize. There were good men, both monastic and papal who at various times championed the cause of the Jews. But the overwhelming majority favored persecution. They spread lies. The worst example that never went away was the Blood Libel. The first recorded case was in Norwich in 1144. Jews were accused of killing a Christian child to drink his blood for wine on Passover and use his flesh for Matza. Part of the Catholic Mass was to take the wafer symbolizing the body of Jesus and the wine as his blood. According to dogma, a miracle occurred, and the wine and wafer actually turned into the body and blood of Jesus. This ceremony was easily transposed onto Jews (despite the obvious point that blood and human flesh are strictly forbidden). Preachers spread the libel regardless.

The blood libel was the excuse for killing Jews in Norwich, Gloucester, Bury St Edmunds, Blois, Erfurt, Fulda. Frankfurt, Lincoln, and Trent. The supposed victims of the evil Jews were turned into saints and folk-heroes. The Blood Libel has continued right into modern times, in Russia the Beilis trial in 1904. Even in the USA and Canada, there have been blood libels in Massena, Quebec, and Winnipeg (fortunately without serious consequences but showing how deeply embedded myths are). The Blood Libel is now perpetuated in parts of the Muslim world. Many in the credulous West still believe that Jews in Israel poison wells and lust for blood. Such dangerous lies, like Holocaust denial, perpetuate hatred of Jews.

There have been other cultural causes of hatred. Perhaps the most notorious in Germany has been the Judensau, the Jew sow. A tradition going back to

Medieval times that Jews eat the excrement of pigs and drink sow's milk. It was designed to de-humanize and put Jews on the same level as animals, to vilify their rabbis and their religion. Sculptures, and pictures of Jews, were placed in churches and on city gates for over six hundred years. The one in Frankfurt was only taken down in the nineteenth century. There is still one at the State Church in the German city of Wittenberg.

The lingering Jew folk-hatred can be seen in the passion plays that were and are still performed on Palm Sundays, cities across Europe, and the catholic world. These dramas about the death of Jesus have always portrayed the Jews as evil devils (in obvious Jewish clothes) who plotted to kill Jesus. Just think of how Hieronymus Bosch painted them as ugly evil hook-nosed deformed beings dripping blood and saliva. Such plays are much fewer nowadays. Still, each year some nineteen are performed and still attract huge audiences. The biggest in Oberammergau in Germany that involves a whole village every ten years, was a favorite of Hitler. Only recently have they begun to tone down the way Jews are depicted.

All this is deeply embedded in the European psyche. Thousands of years of such conditioning is bound to de-sensitize people to Jewish suffering and almost justify violence against us by those too primitive or too blinded to see the truth. Is it any wonder that so many people, even in the USA today, hate Jews? Thousands of years of conditioning and contempt cannot be easily washed away. Even if the Catholic Church has really tried very hard in recent years to do something about it and Evangelical Christians have great sympathy for Judaism

Sadly, in the modern secular world Marxism, the foundation of Left-Wing ideology in the West today still carries with it the virus against Jews as rich, soulless oppressors of the workers and the dispossessed. They see Jews as a religion which in itself is a crime (unless it is not Judaism). They refuse to see Jews as a nation with national rights. They deny any history of a Jewish presence in the Holy Land. And they claim that if Jews use political influence to advance their goals, they are somehow doing something that no other minority or vested interest does. They insist they are not anti-Semites. But in fact, they are simply showing how ignorant they are of Judaism and its history.

No one will deny that we Jews are imperfect and often our own worst enemies. But hating a whole people regardless is a pathology. There is no inoculation. Even education has only had limited efficacy. All of this leads me to the conclusion that although the world has advanced, and not everyone is infected with the disease of Jew-hatred, the poison still exists. Kristallnacht reminds us of what rabid hatred can lead to. The battle against it must continue.