

Ghettos

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The term “ghetto”, meaning a place where Jews were forced to live within a city, does not appear until 1611. In 1570 the Italian papacy insisted that Jews be confined to certain areas of towns in order to prevent them contaminating the local Christians. The actual word simply means a “foundry” in medieval Italian. That happened to be the name for the area in Venice which was turned into an “exclusion zone” some years after the original papal order.

Jews have been living in both voluntary and involuntary self-governed communities for thousands of years. In the Babylonian Exile, Jews were settled in specific areas. They, and then the Persians, wanted to make use of Judean skills and talent. Later on, rivalry and tensions between Greek and Jewish merchants led to segregated communities within the big cities of the Graeco-Roman Empire.

If many instances involved force majeure, or political or security considerations, there were also religious ones. Jewish law requires community—to pray together, to care for each other in terms of charity and welfare, and to carry out all those laws that concern relations between human beings that play a far greater role in the Jewish tradition than most people, including Jews themselves, often realize. And if, in addition, one cannot travel on Shabbat and festivals, one simply has to live in proximity to other Jews (or build a holiday home in the Hamptons with sufficiently large guest quarters to accommodate a quorum). This did not mean one could ignore non-Jews. The principle of feeding and giving charity to non-Jewish poor was reiterated time and again.

However, there is much that is positive in Jews living in communities, whether voluntarily or by force. In most other societies, certainly European and other post-tribal societies, people tend to interact horizontally. Aristocrats mix with aristocrats, the rich with the rich. Few beggars can afford a “pile” in Gloucestershire. Middle classes usually associate and live with others of the middle classes. Peasants or poor working classes live, drink, and socialize with their own. In much of Europe, the wealthy and the aristocratic Christians worshipped in their private chapels attended, by their personal chaplains, and only very rarely condescended to attend church with the proletariat. The upper classes disdained and avoided the unwashed masses.

In the Jewish communities around the world, until relatively recently, it was otherwise. Religious life was (and is) as much concerned with community as with personal religious faith. Even if you were the wealthiest of “Court Jews” you had to come to the synagogue regularly. Every day you mingled with the poor and the needy. You heard of their problems and of fellow Jews throughout the Christian and Muslim world. You could not be unaware of the suffering Jew. Of course it was not always that ideal. Often the rich who

married off their children to the offspring of the rabbinical intellectual elite combined to preserve their control over communal affairs. Still, the ghetto had a beneficial, cohesive effect.

Nowadays religiously committed Jews live in “ethnically” gated communities. An academic way of describing them is “enclaves”, which means not just religious communities but likeminded ones. Some think Israel is the largest “gated community” of them all, but it is hardly a likeminded one. All enclaves tend to betray an inward-looking preoccupation that invariably results in myopia.

It should be almost impossible to cut oneself off from the community nowadays. With overwhelming impact of the media, internet, cell phones, and easy and free access to the rest of society, one cannot but be aware of alternative communities, cultures and needs. So, for example, everyone knows this Happy Holidays time. By that I do not just mean the Christian religious aspect. The overwhelming commercial and materialist character of the “season” is in some ways worse. We are encouraged, indeed pressurized, to spend unnecessarily. The waste is a scandal.

For those of us in minority cultures, we need not so much to reject what is going on around us, as to reiterate alternative values. The stronger the pull away from our tradition, the more we need to find ways to counterbalance. Once it was quite prevalent in the ghetto to fast on “Nittel” because the supposed birth of Christianity was no celebration for Jews suffering at the hands of the Church. This year our fast day is one week earlier. Friday, December 17th, is a fast day—the Tenth of Tevet—when the campaign that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple got underway. You couldn’t think of a greater contrast.

So surrounded by difference as we are, shouldn’t this make us more open minded? For all the variety of ideas and opinions that bombard us, we prefer to fall back on what is familiar and secure. So we tend only to log on to sites or read blogs that confirm our preconceptions. Ironically, as the world of communication expands, we tend to restrict ourselves to a more limited range of perspectives. We simply press the “delete” button if something comes up we don’t want to know about. I recall someone in London telling me he didn’t come to my synagogue because he did not want to agree with the rabbi each week. I thought that was pretty impressive.

The issue is not so much the ghetto itself as the “ghetto mentality”. Why shouldn’t people live where they choose to? It is not where you live but how you think that decides whether you are open-minded or not. Some of the most narrow minded prejudiced people I have met have lived in the most openly academic of environments. It is the mental ghetto, not the physical ghetto, that is the single largest threat to our modern multiracial societies and to inter-human harmony. This is as true of the mindless hatred directed towards us as it is of that which too many of us project on to “the other”.