

Chaos

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

According to the Bible, before the world was created there was chaos, Tohu VaVohu. However, it was out of chaos that something positive emerged. I am a fan of chaos. The alternative to chaos is order. But too often order is worse. Human life constantly shuttles between these two, on a personal and on a national level. Jewish life, in particular, has always been thus. But I believe we should welcome it. This state can be creative. It can throw up all kinds of new possibilities. Maybe we need to be reminded every now and then, as now, of what chaos is like.

In Judaism there are many conflicting ideologies and social groups that, by definition, are all but impossible to reconcile. Reform Jews have split from the mainstream by deciding to adopt patrilineal descent to define Jewish religious identity. Many Ultra Orthodox sects have split by making identity depend on exclusive dress and standards of practice that reject modernity and go way beyond mainstream Jewish law.

We are at odds with ourselves and at odds with much of the world. For some this alienation is religious, and for some it is political. In the Diaspora we can read, say, the New York Times, and not a day goes by without an article critical and demeaning of Israel and Jews. We can hear news and media losing no opportunity to blame Jews and Israel, themselves, for the hatred directed towards them. We do suffer demonization. Israel faces delegitimization, from without and within. According to Pew Foundation many young Jewish Americans do not identify either with Judaism or Israel. I no longer expect the left wing to accept Israel's right to exist any more than I expect Muslims in the Middle East to accept Israel's right to exist. And I realize we few 14 million or so are surrounded by billions of enemies. Doesn't this scare me? How long can so few, however talented, however determined, however brave and convinced of the rightness of their cause, hope to survive against billions?

I do not believe for one second that if Israel were to disappear tomorrow we would be any more loved or respected. And I do not believe for one minute that anything would change if Israel were to become the most ethical, caring, uncorrupt, nonviolent state in the world tomorrow. At the same time, I am depressed by the negative aspects of Israeli and Jewish society, the gap between the rich and poor, between communities, religions, and races (even if they are no worse than every other polity or state or religion or people). Yes, I do expect them to be better. Yet we can also find sites and media that are able to put Israel in perspective in relation to other states. I am elated and impressed by Israel's achievements despite the countervailing winds. Dammit, why else would Somali refugees avoid their own Muslim states to try for refuge in a Jewish one?

The political landscape of America is changing. Eighty percent of Jews used to vote Democrat. Now it's reducing rapidly. Jewish life in the USA used to

be dominated by Reform Judaism; now the Orthodox are taking over. Obama and most Democrats are completely out of sympathy with Israel. Academia is resolutely anti-Zionist, read anti-Israel, read anti-Jewish-self-determination. Russia and China still vote against Israel at the UN. But we can also hear those who stand up for our right to exist unmolested, be we Jews or Israelis.

India is moving in our direction. While Turkish Islamic leaders spew hatred we still trade, and we help the Kurds. As ISIL decapitates and burns within miles of Israel's borders, Israel herself is increasingly self-sufficient in gas, oil, and water, not to mention technology. And frankly Judaism has never been stronger in terms of people, learning and power for two thousand years. Do we look at the cup half empty or half full?

Chaos is everywhere. One minute Russia is down, the next it is invading other countries, and no one can stop it. Assad of Syria is the enemy; then he's the ally. One day the EU is a powerful economic entity, and the next it is on its knees and fragmenting. The USA is the world's policeman at one stage, and then it cannot take a stand on anything. Once Japan ruled the east; now it is China. Six months ago oil was a \$100 a barrel and now it is \$50. The Swiss franc goes wild. The Chinese Yuan is nervous.

Nothing stays the same. History does not end. Humans remain the complex organisms they were created to be or evolved into, whichever theory you prefer.

We have always dealt with shifting powers and alliances. Chaos is our natural state. Where are the great communities of a thousand years ago, Babylon, Spain, Egypt, Southern Italy? Others have taken their place. We never know for certain who will be our friends, who our allies. But as Mordechai said to Esther two-and-a-half thousand years ago, "If you don't act now, salvation for the people will come from somewhere else, even if you perish." Salvation always comes, from the unlikeliest quarters. Though I do believe we need to work very hard at it!

Some focus on the negatives. I do not for one minute suggest it's all doom and gloom. But it is challenging. Those who put their Jewishness first, wherever they are, are always different. But they are the ones who step up! We have usually found a way of turning the negative into the positive. And when within a state of chaos or uncertainty we withdraw into those we think we can trust because they share our fate; we cluster into small subsections and coterie for reassurance but also for regeneration.

In conditions of turbulence and flux one looks for points of refuge, rocks to cling to, priorities. Just as in the world at large the buzz word is knowledge. Within our world that word is commitment. What is my rock? It is my people. (Judaism is a people, not just a religion.) That means supporting them wherever they may be. It is not that I cannot see our faults and failures. But it is no different than a mother who loves her son regardless of what he has done. There are billions to care about other religions, other peoples. Why shouldn't I give priority to mine?

The question really is how much one cares. It is not in what way you show your commitment, whether it is religious or social or secular, but how committed ARE you? We will survive. When the floodwaters rise, I want to be with the committed, with the faithful, not with those who swim with fashionable tides. We need chaos. It strengthens us. It always has. Within chaos the small little atoms of cohesion survive to build another world.

I am not saying we must ignore, turn blind eyes or refuse to react. We should never let evil go un-reacted-to. But at the same time we need to focus on the positive not on the negative. We will feel better for it too.