

Bad Decisions

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

“Those who cannot learn from history are condemned to repeat it.” George Santayana was not referring to Israel, but he might have been. When all is said and done, the fast of Tisha B’Av, the Ninth Day of Av, is a fast that symbolizes and commemorates bad decisions. The Israelites were always very good at that. The wonder is that they survived at all.

We managed to alienate world powers time and again. Two-and-half thousand years ago and down to the establishment of Christianity and Islam, religion was not so much a matter of faith, but rather of politics.

Cyrus of Persia, in his famous stele, was happy to accept and support all and every religion practiced in his empire, so long as he was acknowledged as the supreme leader. So was Alexander the Great. He and the Roman emperors after him happily sent sacrifices up to Jerusalem to please the locals, as they did everywhere else. What they expected in exchange was the acceptance of their hegemony politically. Only the intolerance of Christianity and Islam, who insisted that they alone were the sole possessors of theological truth, forced conversions and religious martyrdom (and all that nonsense) on others.

So when Egypt, the world power to the south, wanted to pass through on its way to fighting the Hittites, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, it expected Israel to be its ally. Similarly Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, on their way south against Egypt or west against Greece, weren’t interested in religious issues. Every time little Israel happened to straddle the main routes, north and south or east and west, between the rival powers, and virtually every time the Israelite leaders backed the wrong guy and got beaten up. Isn’t it ironic that about the only time we got it right was when most of us identified with Persia (but that, of course, was prior to Shia Islam).

We pride ourselves in our history that we fought for our religion to keep it alive. But in fact almost all our battles, directly or indirectly, effectively undermined our religion instead. Sometimes treaties are more effective than wars. Or as the Charedi world loves to say, we are better off relying on God. Which might be true in abstraction but is no way to save ones life.

I cannot tell if this treaty with Iran will prove to be the disaster that logic and its opponents claim it to be. I certainly would not trust the ayatollahs or the Revolutionary Guards or the Basij further than I could smell them. But tell me, pray, which politicians do you trust? If you were in the Middle East now, is there a devil you know and prefer? Is there anyone there you would trust?

Who would have thought Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia would be on our side? Israel has been surviving surrounded by maniacal enemies of all kinds without and within. It has done so in part because of its own determination to

survive but also because it has established alliances and made friends. It has been nimble. Friends have come and gone all the time. Russia and Czechoslovakia helped Israel once, when the USA refused. France provided military and atomic assistance once. America only began to stand up for Israel during and after the Yom Kipur war. India, for the first time, is an ally. And who knows where Russia and China will stand in the future? The USA is now saying it might not support Israel any more in the UN, where Canada (and Micronesia) and occasionally the Czech Republic are the only ones Israel can rely on.

I am not as worried as some are about this deal Obama is so desperate for. He has his calculations too and reigning in ISIL is one of them. But I do worry like mad that the Israeli government will do something really silly and alienate the wrong people. Israel might like to think it can go it alone, but it can't. It needs supplies and arms. I am not worried about the braying asses who want to delegitimize and boycott. I'd rather be in control of my own destiny than worry about trying to win over people who are too prejudiced to be won over and think Israel is the devil incarnate and Hamas and Hezbollah are warm, fuzzy teddy bears.

This is why Tisha B'Av is so important to me. It is not so much about a building or a city that was burnt to the ground twice in 600 years. It's more the lesson of the past. That those terrible things did not have to happen and would not have happened had we only made the right decisions.

You remember the famous story of the Talmud, where Rabbi Akiva and his friends were walking in the rubble of the Temple, and his friends were crying but Akiva was smiling. When they asked him why, he said, "Because just as our downfall was predicted, so too was our return in triumph." And lo and behold he went and backed the Bar Kochba revolt against Rome that set us back two thousand years.

Nevertheless Tisha B'Av reminds us that despite the worst of decisions, we can survive them. Great rabbis and great politicians have both made disastrous decisions. I will fast long and hard in the hope that in our generation the lessons of history will be learnt! This is a fast about second chances.