

We Will Survive

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Last week I received a pained email from a friend and former pupil of mine from England who was worried about our future as Jews. Here is his letter (abbreviated):

“Last week I went to a talk by Tuvia Tenenbom, and it really was a bit of a shock to the system. His point was that Israel was being completely undermined by a massive majority of “self-hating Jews”. He claims to have been in vast audiences of Liberal and Conservative Jews who have “whooped and hollered” when speakers have denounced...the crimes of Israeli soldiers and politicians...How do you see the Jewish community in terms of its support for Israel, and do you agree with Tuvia that the power has shifted dramatically to the left and has become anti-Zionist or at least the self-doubt has muted their voices and affected their views?”

My reply:

Tenenbom is right in that we are seeing unprecedented alienation, amongst many Jews and non-Jews, from Judaism and from Israel. But I am not as despondent as he is, and I certainly do not equate all criticism of Israeli society and politicians with anti-Semitism or self-hate. But neither should the enemy deflect us from admitting our own failings and mistakes or our own extremists and fascists. However, if one is to criticize Israel it should be from the standpoint of commitment to its survival and love for its heritage and history. As the book of Proverbs says, “Better the arrows of a friend than the kisses of an enemy.” And I would rather be alive and disliked than loved and dead. The record of humanity caring about Jews is not a good one.

You seem most worried about the number of Jews who are turning against Israel. The Jewish people has always been divided on matters of religion and, of course, Zionism, usually with regard to degrees of commitment. Let us not forget that once two rival Jewish kingdoms went to war against each other. Anti-Zionism and anti ritualism were the default positions of Reform Judaism at one stage. This is the price of our great tradition of debate and freedom, for better and for worse.

If there was a greater and wider level of support for a Jewish homeland after the Second World War, that was because a generation that experienced an existential threat is likely to feel much more strongly about survival than one that has been privileged and mollycoddled and raised in a secure world on the self-indulgent principle of “me” rather than “we”. The post-Holocaust generation, the Zionist pioneers, fought to preserve the Jewish people. The battle was won beyond all expectation. But history moves in cycles. The present generation does not care so much. That is the reality. Only the minority is passionately committed, either through family, education, or religious inspiration.

We are moving away from the old lukewarm vague affiliations. I never particularly liked the low-level, uninformed Jewish identification of my youth, based on social rather than religious identification. Often characterized as "feeling Jewish" or Chopped Liver and Gefilte Fish Judaism. I much prefer living a Jewish life that demands more, is better informed and more committed to Jewish survival. Today those who survive and thrive in Anglo and American Jewry are far better educated, committed, creative, dynamic, and upbeat than ever in my youth, I assure you.

This trend is reflected in the fact that voting characteristics of Jewish communities are changing. In the UK most Jews used to vote Labour, in the US, Democrat. Hardly any committed Jews vote Labour anymore, and those who vote Democrat have shrunk by almost half. This is almost entirely because the left whether Jewish or not is antagonistic towards Israel; the recent Pew survey supports this. Israel is proportionally more religious, more committed, less cowed by Western opposition than communities living in the diaspora.

Committed Jews do not worry about continuity, because they are busy living it and contributing to it. Throughout the Jewish world, this is the one sector of our people that is growing exponentially. Wherever I look, I see more and more working very hard to preserve our people against unbelievable odds—physically, intellectually, commercially, and publicly—and not flinching from engaging with opposition. It is a little miracle.

Yet I have to admit that ultra-Orthodox extremists and intolerance are also driving Jews away, both in Israel and the diaspora. I regret that so many are abandoning Judaism. I admire those movements struggling to woo or retain as many as possible. But survival does not depend on numbers as much as passion. Assimilation inevitably draws away many in free, open societies where it is easier to blend in with the majority than stick out like a sore thumb.

As for self-hating or disconnected or alienated Jews, that too has always been with us. Under Medieval Christianity and Islam, some of the worst persecutors of Jews were other Jews and apostates. Nothing new. Been there before, and we have survived, not them. Not one of Harold Pinter's children is Jewish any more, to give just one example from Britain. Hollywood even when full of Jewish émigrés, the New York Times, ignored anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. So today there are Jewish actors and actresses who abandon their roots. As for trying to understand the pathology of those who reject or hate their own, I doubt it will help. Where someone was not convinced of a position rationally in the first place, he can rarely be disabused of mistaken views rationally either.

Jews have always rallied when they were oppressed, attacked, or hated. I have heard recently of many cases on both sides of the Atlantic where lukewarm Jews have been provoked into becoming more committed and proactive as they have realized they will be pilloried regardless of what concessions they make to current attitudes. So I do not like or enjoy the current wave of Jew/Israel hatred. But in a way the historical exception has been the past 60 years of post-Holocaust tendency too sublimate Jew hatred.

We should not underestimate or overestimate the antipathy directed at Jews by the left, by many (not all) Muslims, and frankly by those infected by the virus of Jew hatred that refuses to disappear. I recall speaking in a debate at the Cambridge Union in 1963 against the motion that "Israel has no right to exist." This not new. Religion, history, politics, ideology, and human nature have all contributed to the disease.

In the US and Europe, the left-wing, democratic voting, idealistic voters, both Jews and non-Jews, have always tended towards universalism rather than denominationalism or nationalism. Flower Power was always more attractive to the mass than religion. Israel was acceptable so long as it was left wing, a command economy, and not too Jewish. As it has become more capitalist and more Jewish, it inevitably has alienated such people. Let us not forget Marxism hated religion and Jews and Arab nationalism fought against settling in the Holy Land long before Israel was a state. In the end we must use the tools we need to survive.

Quite apart from this, Europe has always had a strong anti-American sentiment, due to jealousy of its strengths and liberties and the superseding of its empires. Israel is a convenient punching bag proxy for the US. And of course the wave of anti-Semitism, regardless of its source, only makes matters worse. The world prefers a pliant, petitioning Jew to one who fights for his rights.

Israel will compensate for those turning against it in the West by increasing ties with India and China. Where one door closes, another opens. The Sunni states are closer now to Israel in their conflict with the Shia than ever before, even if the Arab/Muslim in the street still hates Jews precisely because they seem almost diabolically successful, and have been the scapegoat for generations and the excuse for failure.

I believe with complete faith that so long as we are true to our values (a big "if") and do not give up the fight, we and Israel will survive.

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