

Same Old Story

I never cease to be amazed at how certain themes of Jewish history keep on repeating themselves.

Purim was the story of a Persian plutocrat who wanted to get rid of the Jews. But there was another opponent of the Jews who lived roughly during the same period. He was called Sanballat and is mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah as someone who tried to prevent the Judeans from settling and rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Assyrian King Sargon the 2nd conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. He exiled most of the pagan ten northern tribes to the ends of the Assyrian empire and replaced them with other peoples he had conquered. For the next two hundred years, these new inhabitants of the north lived alongside the Judeans of the south and adopted many of the religious customs of the south. They became known as Samaritans after their main city Samaria (Shomron) and they were not exiled by the Babylonians.

From 590 BCE to 586 BCE the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judea in three stages. They removed most of its inhabitants to Babylonia where the Judeans were able to establish their own community. But like all diaspora communities, it was split between those who wanted to assimilate and those who wanted to remain committed to a Judean identity.

In 539 BCE Cyrus, the Great conquered Babylon and a year later authorized those Judeans who want to, to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the Temple. They returned in three waves (and most stayed behind in Persia). But the Judeans came up against Sanballat who (with the support of the local Persian governor Tattenai) tried to block the returnees, claiming that the Judeans were aliens who did not belong.

The Samaritans claimed to be the true Judeans, heirs of the Mosaic tradition which only names the mountains Gerizim and Eyval on the West Bank of the Jordan where Samaritan temples were, not Jerusalem. They also claimed that the Judeans were falsifying the Torah (not unlike Islam a thousand years later). They accused the Babylonian Jews of undermining the Law of Moses by inventing an Oral Law that modified the meaning of its texts. If the Judeans succeeded, he feared the Samaritans would find themselves in an inferior position. He and his allies succeeded in turning the Persian leadership against the Judeans by accusing them of dual loyalties. Ring any bells?

After Cyrus's death, their efforts succeeded and whoever it was who stopped construction, the community in Judea went into decline. Only when Darius the Great discovered Cyrus's authorization in the palace archives, did he send his close advisor Nehemiah to Judea as the Governor (together with Ezra the spiritual leader), with reinforcements and supplies to complete the work. As soon as Sanballat and his associates heard that Nehemiah and the Jews were building the walls, they once again tried to stop the work and they appealed to other people in the area to help them. But Nehemiah was equal to the

emergency and with his forces held off the opposition while they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and then expanded the Temple.

Sanballat also found allies among the Judeans. They were as divided then as they are today. In Babylon, many aristocratic priests had adopted Persian laws and ways of life and married local women. Even so, they insisted on retaining their Biblically commanded tithes and privileges. Ezra and Nehemiah both tried to revive religious life and force the assimilated priests either to return to the demands of the religion or to relinquish their religious rights. Many of them refused and they allied themselves with Sanballat.

Nehemiah discovered that one of the grandsons of the current high priest Eliashiv had married a daughter of Sanballat. Nehemiah also discovered that Eliashiv had leased the storerooms of the temple to Samaritan supporters in effect running his own private economy. Meanwhile, throughout the struggle to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, most Jews were happy to live elsewhere in the Persian empire even if many of them made regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Slowly the Judean community regained its authority. And the Jews of the Land of Israel and Babylonian Jewry developed along parallel religious lines with their differences but within the Persian empire. Yet as the story of Purim relates, loyal to their Jewish religious identity.

I am mentioning all this precisely because in so many ways this mirrors the religious and political divisions in the Jewish world today. One section of Jewry is loyal to the Oral Law as well as the written Law. Another rejects the Oral Law altogether. One is strongly involved nationally in the survival and success of the reborn Jewish community in the land of Israel. Others are more loyal to their adopted countries and identify with the secular culture of the Diaspora or reject Zionism altogether. One part of the Jewish community is happy to marry out, the other strongly wishes to marry Jewish partners. In Israel, as elsewhere the left hates the right, and the right hate the left. The old adage "All Israel are friends" no longer applies. But then whenever did it? Meanwhile, we face a constant threat from antagonists who claim we are aliens and want to "replace us".

In 1962 Yaakov Herzog, son of the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, Ambassador to Canada, an exceptional man in every respect and polymath, told me that were it not for the external threat, there would be civil war.

Things never change and somehow despite the internal and external conflicts, we manage to survive.