

The Whale

Hundreds of thousands have been butchered in Syria; ISIS tortures and crucifies; Islamists blow up scores of innocents on a weekly basis; yet for many, Israel is seen as the chief obstacle for peace in the Middle East. This is beyond absurd.

The Talmud addressed this anomaly some 1700 years ago. One of the great Talmudic sages, Rabbah the son of Bar Chana, related the following strange episode:

Once, while on a ship, we came to what we assumed was a large island, since we saw on it sand and growing grass. We disembarked the ship, went on to the island, built a fire, and cooked our meal. Yet what we assumed to be an island was really a fish. When the fish felt the heat, he rolled over and we were plunged into the water. Had the ship not been nearby, we would have drowned.

-- Talmud Bava Basra 73b.

What is the meaning behind this absurd Talmudic tale, related by one of its great sages, Rabba the son of Bar Chana?

According to some of the great Talmudic commentators, this tale captures, in intriguing metaphor, one of the most essential truths about Jewish history, particularly one relating to the holiday of Purim, which we will be celebrating this week.

The Journey

From the moment they stood at Mt. Sinai more than three millennia ago, the Jewish people have been traveling on a lone and long journey. Their destination is a world healed, redeemed and reunified with its Creator; a society cleansed from ego-centricity, hatred and bloodshed; a universe permeated with moral and spiritual awareness, filled with “the knowledge of the Divine as the waters cover the sea” (in the words of the prophet Isaiah chapter 11).

The Torah and its Mitzvos serve as their blueprint for this courageous voyage in a vast and seemingly endless sea. Yet the waters have often become increasingly tumultuous and the voyage discouraging, if not apparently futile. So when in the midst of their journey they observed what seemed to be an island of serenity, an oasis of tranquility, a respite from a miserable fate, many of them abandoned the “ship” of Jewish consciousness and commitment for the perceived blessings of freedom and happiness.

The era in which the Purim story occurred was a classical example of this pattern. The king was married to a Jewish woman; large segments of Jewish society assimilated into Persian culture; the Jewish establishment played a pivotal role in the economical and political structures of the Persian Empire. The community had been invited to the royal feast and given status as equal citizens. In reciprocity, the Jews learned how to “behave;” how to become integrated and law abiding citizens. They did not demand kosher food or kosher wine at the feast, nor did they create any other waves that would disturb the equilibrium and make them stand out as Jews. Seventy years after being expelled from their ancient homeland, their Temple being burnt to the ground, many of them had abandoned the old ship, secure in their belief that they have reached an island of serenity; they finally “made it.”

Identity Crisis

Throughout history, the struggle of Jewish identity and our relationships with the world around us has become so challenging, that it often caused us to redefine ourselves from within. Jean-Paul Sartre claimed in his *Sur le Question Juif* that the only thing Jews had in common was that they were the victims of hate. It is not Jews who create anti-Semitism, he said, but anti-Semitism that creates Jews.

Arthur Koestler wrote: "Self-hatred is the Jews patriotism." Franz Kafka said: "What do I have in common with the Jews? I don't even have anything in common with myself."

Time and time again we have been lured into the faith that if we abandon the “ship” of Judaism—

of Torah and Mitzvos—we would gain acceptance among the brotherhood of mankind. "Be a man in the street and a Jew at home," was the 19th century slogan by the "Enlightened" Jews in Western Europe. If only Jews weren't so Jewish we would have less anti-Semitism, so went the theory.

The past three centuries have produced a dazzling variety of movements, ideals and solutions to the age-old "Jewish problem," offering islands of hope for a people tormented by persecution and targeted for abuse. The Enlightenment (Haskalah) came to "civilize" us and allow us free entry into European society; the Marxists and Socialists promised to create a utopia for us and all of mankind; Zionism's goal was to grant us a State, a national identity, and thus cure anti-Semitism once and for all; Reform came to make us acceptable to the non-Jewish society and to inculcate us with humanistic values; secularism came to free us from the burdens of tradition which have supposedly hindered our progress and happiness.

All of these attempts have been brilliantly captured in that ancient Talmudic tale: *Once, while on a ship, we came to what we assumed was a large island, since we saw on it sand and growing grass. We disembarked the ship, went on to the island, built a fire, and cooked our meal.*

Disillusionment

Yet, ironically, the end of the Talmudic tale also came to be: *What we assumed to be an island was really a fish. When the fish felt the heat, he rolled over and we were plunged into the water. Had the ship not been nearby, we would have drowned.*

Each time we came to feel comfortable on the island, and we began at last to live out our latent dreams, the "fish" turned over and threw us back into the raging waters. In the days of Purim, when the Jews felt that they had successfully integrated into mainstream culture, under the very nose of a Jewish queen—the king was persuaded to issue forth a plan of genocide for the Jewish people.

Assimilation never cured prejudice. Not in the days of Purim, nor at any time in the future. It didn't even in 15th century Spain, where Jews converted to Christianity and yet still suffered from persecution under the vicious doctrine of *limpieza de sangre* ("purity of blood"), the forerunner of modern racial anti-Semitism. It didn't in 20th century Germany where Jews were often "more German" than the Germans. It didn't in the Modern State of Israel constructed as a secular democracy.

The historical truth remains that none of the above movements achieved their stated goals. The Holocaust made mockery of Jewish integration in the general humanistic world; Zionism created the State of Israel, which we cherish deeply, but did not put to rest the problems of anti-Semitism and still struggles to provide even the most basic security for its citizens. Israel still needs to fight for its "right" to exist. Stalin "cured" us of the "paradise" of Marxism and Socialism; the Enlightenment apparently did not sufficiently civilize us; secularism has deprived generations of direction and meaning, leaving our youth thirsty for identity and purpose.

Our Hope

"*Had the ship not been nearby, we would have drowned,*" is how the Talmudic sage concludes the episode. What saved us during the time of Purim – and what has guaranteed our existence throughout our long and difficult history – was not forfeiting our identity and surrendering our truth; it was our animated relationship with the living G-d, the creator of heaven and earth, and our dedication to His Torah and Mitzvos that has allowed us to survive and thrive, till we reach the culmination of the voyage, speedily in our days.

(Excerpted from "A Story of an Island and a Whale" by YY Jacobson; theyeshiva.net)