

Crisis and Creativity in Jewish History

by Moshe Dann (March 2015)

As much as the Jewish people have been defined by faith, they have been shaped by their response to tragedies. No other group of people has been subjected to such continuous and prolonged persecution and, simultaneously, has contributed so much to civilization. The dynamic of Jewish history is unique, not only because the Jewish people have experienced periodic destruction, but because they survived and prevailed against overwhelming odds.

Not only did Jews maintain their distinctiveness within the foreign cultures, they adapted to host countries and adopted cultural variations without compromising basic Jewish values and traditions – albeit despite widespread assimilation. No other group of people was able to do that over such long periods of time. And never before has an ancient civilization revived – and by the descendants of earlier generations.

From the time of their enslavement by the Egyptians until today, the Jewish response to tragedy has been not only survival as a people, but a creative energy that marks them for admiration – and annihilation. Even after the Holocaust, the world remains hostile or indifferent to the fate of Jews threatened by Moslem countries – assisted by the UN, EU, NGOs, church groups and others.

Despite 3,500 years of persecution, Jews are not only still around, but resettling their ancient homeland and, even more amazing, defending it. The fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Ingathering and Redemption leads towards the potential for greatness and for disaster. This paradox that infuses Jewish history suggests that challenged even by the most traumatic events, we can re-discover who we are. Our strengths make us vulnerable and our vulnerabilities can also make us strong. Catastrophic events often carry within them the seeds of future growth; destruction nurtures new forms of survival.

This pattern, marked in Torah by seven critical periods is evident in the course of the history of the Jewish people and it provides a clue to the uniqueness of that historical process. The periodization is not arbitrary; the number conforms to an unique historical pattern mentioned in Leviticus, Chapter 26:

If you will not listen to me I will continue to chastise you seven times more for your

sins...And if you walk contrary to me and will not listen to me I will bring seven times more plagues upon you, according to your sins...And if you will not be reformed by me, by these things but will walk contrary to me, then I will walk contrary to you and I will strike you seven times for your sins...Then I will walk contrary to you also in anger and I will punish you seven times for your sins..

This is the only place in Torah where this specific number, *seven*, is given in reference to the number of times the Jewish people will be punished. Uniquely, its repetition *four* times corresponds to the four exiles into which the Jewish people were taken: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Rome. Seven completes a cycle and it is in this last stage that we now find ourselves.

This perspective when applied to biblical, archeological and historical sites in Eretz Yisrael helps document how Jewish history works. It provides a systematic frame of reference that gives continuity and meaning to disparate places. Because its scope does not include the very early period of Jewish history, sites from the time of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, like Alone Mamre and Machpelah, are not included. The following demonstrates how this approach can be utilized as an historical guide.

(1) Slavery and the escape/expulsion of the Jews from Egypt provided the impetus for receiving Torah, the return to Eretz Yisrael and the flowering of Prophetic tradition.

Beginning with the conquering and settlement of Israel under Joshua, the first place to visit would be, of course, Tel Jericho. On the outskirts of the city, in Gilgal, the Israelites, children of slaves, encamped and celebrated their first Pesach in Eretz Yisrael. According to legend it was here that Joshua composed the *Aleynu* prayer, which declared the ultimate purpose of the Jewish people: to bring an awareness of G-d to the world, to fulfill a divinely inspired mission of establishing a Torah-based society – ethical monotheism – in Eretz Yisrael. No other people and no other conquest ever expressed such a spiritual direction. Jericho's capture represents, therefore, not the physical power of the Jewish people, but their creative purpose and redemptive vision

A similar message was demonstrated when the Israelites came to Shechem (modern Nablus), at the twin mountains of Eval and Gerizim. During the period of Judges, the struggle between the Jewish people and the Canaanite/Philistine peoples focused primarily on survival, not only physically (for example, the story of Deborah in the area of Har Tavor and Hazor), but threatened by assimilation (as in the story of Samson in the area of Bet Shemesh, and Naomi and Ruth in Bethlehem). The threat of internal corruption appears in a story that takes place

at Giva (Givat Shaul, in modern Shufat, a suburb of Jerusalem) where (during the period of Judges) a mob raped and murdered the concubine of a Jew from Bethlehem, resulting in a civil war among the tribes.

The importance of Shilo as a priestly ritual center (the Ark of the Covenant remained there for three and a half centuries) and the rise of Samuel as the greatest prophet of his day parallel the growing conflict with the Philistine armies and culminate in the appointment of Saul as king. Not until his successor, David, however, did the tribes unite, defeating their enemies decisively, establishing Jerusalem as their capitol and sanctifying what would become the Temple Mount, the place where Abraham brought Isaac nearly 1,000 years before.

With prophet, priest and king in place, the stage is set for a monumental development. The building of the First Temple by Solomon reflects the apex of Jewish history, place of the Divine presence, symbol of peace and reconciliation.

The establishment of Jerusalem, the City of David, as the political and religious capital of the Jewish people inaugurates a new era of spiritual and material growth. Excavations there illuminate references in *Tanach* from the time of King David until its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.

Jewish civilization struggled against internal corruption, the Assyrian invasion and apparently wide-spread assimilation. Excavations at Tel Dan indicate the seductive power of idol worship and a devastating political struggle. Despite brief periods of spiritual renewal during the time of Hezekiah and later Josiah, and great prophets, like Isaiah, Jewish civilization decayed rapidly. Even the prophet Jeremiah could not prevent impending destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians, and Exile.

(2) Despite exile and captivity, however, the Jewish people, led by Prophets and Elders flourished in Babylon. Following the Persian conquest of the Babylonian Empire, Jews were given freedom and many thousands returned to Eretz Yisrael and, led by Ezra and Nechemia, they rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and the Second Temple. But many stayed behind.

In order to avoid a schism, The Men of the Great Assembly (Anshe Knesset HaGedolah, 120 of the leading sages of the time) instituted a systematic structure for Jewish life and practice. In exile and far from the Temple they had to create prayers and institutions, especially a calendar and synagogues that would fill the void and maintain common beliefs and practices throughout the Diaspora and in Eretz Yisrael. This enabled Judaism and the Jewish people to survive intact, despite persecutions.

During the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, Greek culture became more influential, assimilation, internal strife and corruption plagued the Hasmonean period, as Jewish sects, like the Essenes at Qumran and Saducees in Jerusalem, arose. Yet Jewish civilization flourished and under Herod, Jerusalem and the Temple became sites of extraordinary beauty and universal recognition as *the* spiritual center of the world. After the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE, and Masada, a few years later, Jewish political independence and spiritual survival seemed doomed.

(3) In spite of brutal Roman persecutions, however, Jewish life did not wither away. The destruction of the Second Temple and exile compelled a new direction. At Yavne, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakki assembled the surviving Sages who began to redact the *Mishna*, Oral Torah, law and traditions that had been handed down for generations, and reorient daily life from ritual offerings and Temple ceremonies towards communal and individual observance. The Bible was canonized and foundations laid for the *Gemara*, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds edited by rabbis of the Sanhedrin.

When the Jews revolted again, in 133-135 CE, led by Bar Kochba and prominent rabbis of the day, including Rabbi Akiva, the revolt was powerful and initially successful lasting several years. Hiding out in places like Betar (in Gush Etzion) and Ein Gedi (the area of the Dead Sea), Jews struggled to survive, minting coins that reflected their hope for independence. The Emperor Hadrian finished what his predecessors had begun; he killed and enslaved so many Jews that for the first time in a millennium, there was no longer a majority of Jews in Eretz Yisrael. During the Roman/Christian (Byzantine) empire Jews were not permitted in Jerusalem and the continuity of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael was in danger.

Led by Rabbis, Jews moved north to the Galilee and Golan, where, in the beginning of the 3rd century CE, they built towns like Tsippori and Bet Shearim, and *yeshivot* where Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi directed the compilation of the *Mishna*. One hundred and fifty years later, the "Palestinian" commentary on the *Mishna*, the Talmud Yerushalmi was completed in Tiberias; the graves of R'Ami and R'Asi, the leaders of that yeshiva are appropriately in Tiberias.

By then the Byzantine Empire had stepped into the shoes of the Roman war lords. Nevertheless, despite persecution, Jews not only survived, but endured, farming and building villages, many with beautiful synagogues in the Galilee and dozens in the Golan. These vivid examples of flourishing Jewish life also reflect the delicate position that Jews faced. While maintaining their steadfast adherence to Judaism, they struggled desperately to survive as loyal subjects of foreign rulers, and as Jews.

Under the early Moslem conquerors, Jews were treated less harshly and, sometimes even decently. But this respite did not last long.

(4) In the 11th century, Crusaders from England, France and Germany destroyed hundreds of Jewish communities throughout Europe on their way to “liberate” the “Holy Land.” Nevertheless, new centers of Jewish learning sprouted throughout Europe with the schools of Rashi, the Tosafot and their successors. Invasions into Spain and conquests throughout North Africa by the (Taliban-style) Almohades in the 12th century brought cultures into contact, as well as conflict. The Zohar, a Kabbalistic text attributed to one of Rabbi Akiva’s students, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochi (who lived in the 2nd century CE and who is buried along with his son, Eliezer in Meron) was discovered by Rabbi Moses de Leon in Spain in the 13th century. Meanwhile, the decline of Babylonian Jewry a century before had caused a considerable migration westwards to North Africa, Egypt and into Europe, especially Spain, contributing to Spain’s “Golden Age” in Jewish literature, law, philosophy and Biblical exegesis, and the early European Renaissance.

In 1099, the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem, killing its Jewish and Muslim inhabitants. But these Christian soldiers did not come to live in Eretz Yisrael; they came to conquer. Their castles were fortifications against the local population; their churches were symbols of power.

In 1187, the Moslem war lord Saladin defeated the Crusaders decisively at Hattin, near Tiberias, and, although several other Crusades were launched, they were unsuccessful. Saladin was nice to the Jews because his personal physician was a Jew from Cordova – Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, Rambam.

Maimonides (1135-1204), buried in Tiberias, was the greatest philosopher and physician of his day. His codification of Jewish law (*Mishna Torah*) made *Halacha*, the framework of Jewish life, more accessible. His great work in Jewish philosophy, *Guide for the Perplexed*, (written in Arabic) helped Jews who were drawn to Muslim philosophers find a Jewish alternative.

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, Nachmanidies (1194-1270), driven out of Spain in 1267, helped re-established a Jewish presence in Jerusalem by providing funds to build the Ramban synagogue. His important scholarly and philosophical works helped preserve Jewish life and thought amidst new dangers: anti-Jewish pogroms were sweeping through Europe; Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from France in 1306 and 1322, and ravaged in Germany. Not only were entire towns wiped out and their property confiscated, the literary backbone of Jewish learning was used for bonfires. In the middle of the 13th century, King Louis IX, “St Louis,” collected all the

Jewish manuscripts he could find and burned them in front of the Louvre in Paris. Without texts, driven from place to place, hounded and hated, the core and continuity of Jewish life was at risk.

In the Middle East, the Mamlukes, a new Moslem army ruled from its capital in Egypt. Originally converted slaves, they seized power in the mid-13th century, stopped the Mongol armies from Asia Minor, beat the Crusaders, and often persecuted Jews. They were defeated by the Turks, in 1517, led by Suleiman the Magnificent who was responsible for rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem.

(5) The expulsion of the Jews from Spain (in 1492) had a major effect on resettlement throughout the Ottoman Empire, the Netherlands and Eastern Europe, but especially in Eretz Yisrael.

The Turks were at the right place and the right time. Basically friendly towards Jewish refugees fleeing persecution and expulsion, Suliman understood that Jews were essential in building his empire. Jews flocked to Safed and Hebron, for example, bringing with them professions, skills and commercial networks and a form of mystical Judaism, kabbalah, a movement that would change Jewish life. The kabbalists asked a haunting question: Where was G-d when the Jewish people were suffering? And they provided a profound answer.

The kabbalists proposed that the Jewish people were akin to sacrificial offerings, ?korbonot, whose purpose was to atone for and ultimately repair the fracturing of the world. Through their pain, the world could be made whole. Suffering, therefore, was neither senseless nor in vain, but was, at least, a measure of redemption that heralded the coming of the Messiah. By perfecting ourselves, we could alter the balance in the world. We mattered precisely because we had been chosen as victims. Persecution was not arbitrary, but part of a divine plan and Jews were the manifestation of its divine light. In prayer and song in the darkest of times one could still sanctify His Name.

Using secret codes imbedded in the Zohar, the kabbalists in Safed believed they were on the verge of a breathtaking, revolutionary moment. Through the teachings of kabbalah, they could rectify the world, cleanse it of evil and open the way for the Messiah. Suffering was a test of faith; return to Eretz Yisrael was its proof. But mysticism was not enough.

Simultaneously, in Safed, Rabbi Yosef Caro (below the synagogue that bears his name) wrote a new codification of Jewish law that provided a clearer and more systematic rendition of previous works. Shulchan Aruch, written primarily for Sephardim, was amended for Ashkenazim by

the leading authority on Jewish law, Rabbi Moses Isserlish, who lived in Poland, thus providing a single comprehensive work on the subject for all Jews.

Finally, the rabbis of Safed under the leadership of Rabbi Yaakov Berav proposed the re-establishment of a Sanhedrin, one of the institutions (along with Monarchy and a Temple) that precedes, or accompanies the coming of the Messiah. Not since the 4th century, when the Sanhedrin and Patriarchate were abolished by the Byzantine/Roman authorities had anyone dared suggest this move. And, although it was ultimately not accepted by most other authorities, it indicates that the rabbis in Safed believed they were on the verge of transforming the world.

(6) A century later, pogroms, especially those in the Ukraine (led by Chelmeniki in 1650's) and a wave of religious fervor stimulated by the appearance of false messianic preachers, like Shabbatai Tzvi, and the debacle that followed, prepared the ground for the Baal Shem Tov, one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people (circa 1700). Led by charismatic Rebbes, these small, communally-centered groups protected the insular Jewish world from physical and spiritual onslaughts by providing messages of hope and faith in the wake of destruction and assimilation. In the 19th century, both religious and secular Zionists envisioned Eretz Yisrael as another form of salvation.

Kabbalist influence and proto-Messianic ideas had a deep influence on European Jews who were inspired by brilliant, colorful and imaginative ideas. Some of them, embodied in poems are sung on Shabbat. A generation later, riding the waves of religious enthusiasm, Shabtai Zvi nearly hoodwinked not only the masses of Jews, but their leaders as well. If the Sultan had not imprisoned and forced him to convert to Islam, he might have gotten away with it. The aftermath was spiritually devastating. Moreover, pogroms swept through the heartland of Eastern European Jewry.

Battered from every side, the seemingly simple message of the Baal Shem Tov, based on kabbalistic ideas and expanded by his students, inspired masses of Jews throughout Eastern Europe and laid the basis for all Hasidic movements. One of the great kabbalist of that era, whom the Baal Shem Tov called his "Rebbe," was Chaim Attar (the Or HaChayim), from Morocco. He made aliyah and died in 1740; he is buried on the Mount of Olives. Around the same time, the great Italian kabbalist, poet and philosopher, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato also made *aliyah*