

Regeneration After Disaster  
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Some years ago, on a summer visit to Israel, my wife and I drove from Jerusalem through the Judean desert to the oasis of Ein Gedi, a perpetual spring of fresh water, high in the hills, flowing into the Dead Sea far below. Throughout the centuries, this oasis served as a haven for rebels, renegades and misfits seeking refuge from the established powers. Here David hid out while fleeing from his life from the soldiers of King Saul. Here was an important command post of Bar Kokhba during the valiant but ultimately disastrous revolt against the legions of imperial Rome.

But I confess it was not because of an interest in history that we got out of our rented car and entered the Ein Gedi nature reserve. We were sweltering in the oppressive Dead Sea heat, and we knew that a fairly easy hike of less than half an hour would bring us to a small wading pool where one can stand under an invigorating cascade of fresh spring water from above.

For several hundred yards we climbed up through the valley, which was filled with lush green reeds, perhaps 10 or 12 feet high, the only green visible for miles around. Then suddenly, above a stone path that crossed the flowing stream, everything looked dramatically different. There was a simple sign in Hebrew and English: "This section was burned by a single cigarette dropped by a careless hiker." As far ahead as we could see, indeed, as far as the first cascade of water, all was a dreary ashen grey.

We continued our climb, in a far more subdued frame of mind. And then I was struck by something unexpected. Scattered through the fields of burnt stubble and ash, little green shoots, perhaps six inches tall, had begun to grow. It became clear that beneath the desolation, life remained. It remained because the spring of fresh water continued to flow, and because the roots of the vegetation were still intact beneath the ground. I realized that these new shoots would grow and flourish, that the next time I visited the site, barring the intervention of another careless hiker, the green vegetation would once again prevail.

These tiny shoots of green growing from the desolate fields of Ein Gedi captured for me something of the essence of Jewish historical experience. We have certainly had our shares of disasters, from ancient times through the unprecedented events we memorialize this day. Yet these catastrophic defeats have not meant an end to the Jewish people and its faith. Somehow, the life-giving waters of renewal continue to flow beneath the surface of historical events, and our people has demonstrated the capacity of returning to

life, like those green shoots in the wilderness. Allow me to revisit with you four such moments in our past, when it seemed to many that our story was coming to an end.

### Babylonians:

First, let us try to imagine ourselves in the summer of the year we refer to as 586 BCE. The Babylonian army had conquered almost the entire territory of Judea, reducing one outpost after another, and now it was besieging Jerusalem. There were prophets who reassured the king with a message like the following: “There is a precedent for this in the time of Isaiah. The Assyrian army was invincible, and it too was besieging Jerusalem. Isaiah’s message was clear: God will not allow His holy city to fall into pagan hands. And so it was; inexplicably the Assyrians withdrew, Jerusalem was saved. Our God will not abandon us this time either.” That was the message of the majority. Only one maverick prophet named Jeremiah had a radically different take, which much have seemed at the time like treason. “Forget what Isaiah said; things are different now. Jerusalem, the Temple can no longer be saved. There is no point in resisting the Babylonian forces. God’s will is for us to submit, to accept defeat, to go into Exile, as atonement for our sins.”

And Jeremiah proved to be right. The walls of Jerusalem were breached, the city fell, the Temple was destroyed, its sacred implements were taken by the pagan conquerors, the leaders of the people were brought to Babylonia as captives. Perhaps as they saw the majestic temples of the Babylonian gods, they felt that their own Temple had been almost insignificant in comparison. Their bewilderment and dismay is expressed so poignantly in the 137: By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, there we wept, as we remembered Zion. . . . *Eikh nashir et shir-Adonai be-admat nekhar?* How can we sing God’s son on foreign soil?” (Ps. 137:1–4). “Either our God has abandoned us, or He has been defeated by the more powerful gods of the Babylonian victors. His dwelling place in Jerusalem has been razed to the ground. If he *could* not or *would* not protect his people in His own home, He certainly cannot help us here.”

That might have been the end of the Judean people, as the Assyrian victory and forced exile had meant the end of the ten northern tribes. Yet the mood of despair did not linger. Jeremiah had also said that the exile would not be permanent, that houses and fields would again be sold in the land of Judea, that once again the sound of joy, of bridegrooms and brides, would be heard in the cities of Judea and the streets of Jerusalem (Jer. 33:10-11). The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the divine chariot coming to the exiles in their Babylonian captivity, and insisted that the Temple would indeed be rebuilt. A new understanding of the God of Israel was developed and articulated in soaring Hebrew poetry by the prophets of the exile: a God not bound to a specific location but accessible wherever His people were dwelling; not a national but a universal God, the Creator of the entire world and all its creatures; sovereign master of all historical events, including the

victory of the Babylonian forces and also eventually the downfall of Babylonia itself. The gods of the other nations were figments of the imagination, without power, without actual existence.

As Howard Jacobson explained in a Channel 4 Programme called “The Bible: A History” that some of you may have seen on Sunday night, many biblical scholars believe that it was during the Babylonian exile that the accounts of Creation and the Patriarchal narratives received the authoritative forms in which we know them; it was during this period in which the Pentateuch, the Torah, was finally redacted. Just as important, in a manner that cannot yet be fully reconstructed, places were designated for the exiled Judeans to come together to remember Zion, to express their hopes for a return, and to worship the one true God without sacrifices, but with words. These were the foundations for a community in Babylonia, later Iraq, that would last some 2500 years into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, producing the Babylonian Talmud and the great academies where it was studied; at one point, under the Abbasid Empire of Islam, the Babylonian community in Baghdad was the political, intellectual and cultural centre for 90% of world Jewry, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders of India. What a remarkable regeneration for a community that had suffered such a devastating defeat.

#### Romans:

Let us now try to imagine the mindset of Jews in the summer of 70 CE, watching the great Herodian Temple disintegrate in fire and smoke, stone after stone of the monumental construction catapulted to the ground. Imagine the profound discouragement, the deep demoralization, the shattering dismay in those who saw virtually everything they considered crucial to their lives as Jews in ruins, and a pagan Roman army in control of all their holy places.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which provided the ritual framework for forgiveness of sins, was totally centred on an elaborately choreographed ritual featuring the High Priest who would enter the Holy of Holies and beseech forgiveness for himself, his fellow priests, and the entire people. Nothing was in place to substitute for this. How could Jews as individuals and as a people set things right with their God?

The great pilgrimage festivals of Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot were also focused on the Temple, which is why Jews were expected if at all possible to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the holidays there. Pesach in particular, involving the re-enactment of the sacrifice and ceremonial eating of the Paschal lamb, could be observed *only* in Jerusalem. If someone was on a journey far away, he was to delay his observance of Pesach for a month. What remained of the festival observance if the Temple was no longer there?

How could Jews fulfil the dozens of commandments of the Torah relating to the sacrificial cult? What were the surviving Kohanim and Levi'im to do when their entire *raison d'être* had been eliminated?

These were among the agonizing questions that faced a shattered and demoralized people, in addition to the massive loss of life sustained by soldiers and civilians in the disastrous revolt against Rome. Modern historians are correct to challenge the mythos that the Jewish population of Eretz Yisrael was systematically expelled by the Romans as the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been by the Assyrians. An important centre of Jewish population remained in Eretz Yisra'el after the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of Masada—enough to mount another serious revolt against Rome some 60 years later. But clearly, massive reconstruction—spiritual as well as physical—was necessary.

This was to a large extent the achievement of group of leaders we know as the Rabbis. We all know the famous story of Yohanan ben Zakkai, carried out of the besieged city of Jerusalem in a coffin by his students, brought to the Roman General Vespasian, whom he convinces to allow him to resettle in the city of Yavneh where he and his colleagues would maintain an academy of study. The historicity of the details have been questioned by modern scholars, but the story represents a symbolic truth: the shifting of the centre of gravity of Jewish life from Temple to academy, from ritual to study, from priests to rabbis, from Jerusalem as centre to disparate communities spread throughout the land and beyond.

It was the rabbis in Yavneh and elsewhere who wrestled with the question: how much of Jewish observance that had been dependent upon the Temple must be discontinued until the Temple could be rebuilt, how much of it could be continued in different contexts. They were the ones who decided that the observance of Pesach could be transferred into the home, with a new liturgy that became the Haggadah. They were the ones who decided that the observance of Yom Kippur could be transferred into the synagogue, with emphasis on a new mechanism of atonement dependent not on sacrifice, but rather on the internal transformation we call repentance. Academy, synagogue, home: these became the reconstructed centres of a newly dynamic life, no longer rooted in one holy city but capable of being transferred to the Galilee, to Babylonian, to Alexandria, even to Rome, and to flourish there until such time as the Temple would be restored. Once again, green shoots of renewed life after the conflagration.

'The Catholic Monarchs' (Ferdinand and Isabella) :

A third act of the imagination. At the beginning of 1492, Jews living on the Iberian peninsula traced their communities back to Roman times—that is, before the invasion of the Visigoths who composed the ethnic base of much of the Spanish population. The Se-

phardi Jews had a highly sophisticated culture, rooted in traditional Jewish texts but enriched by the encounter with two other civilizations. The first was of medieval Islam, with its Arabic translations of works by Greek philosophers, its flourishing poetry, its sophisticated grammatical study, its own philosophical and mystical tradition. The second coming to its own a few centuries later, was of medieval Christendom, with its glorious cathedrals and universities.

There had indeed been problems during the previous century, starting with a series of anti-Jewish riots that began at Seville in 1391 and quickly swept through the peninsula, resulting in substantial loss of life and widespread conversion to Christianity. Many Spanish Jews in the 15<sup>th</sup> century had relatives who were living as Christians; some of them were suffering from discrimination because of their Jewish origins, some of them were suspected of ‘Judaizing’—observing Jewish practices or professing Jewish beliefs—which was permitted for Jews but was heresy for Christians, and they were investigated and sometimes convicted by the newly established Spanish Inquisition.

Yet there was still a strong, vibrant Jewish community in 1492, numbering perhaps 300,000, with beautifully ornate synagogues, distinguished rabbis, wealthy financiers and courtiers influential at the highest levels of governments.

Then, without warning or preparation, a royal edict was publicized in all the cities of the Spanish kingdoms, giving the Jews 3 months to wind up their affairs and be gone from the land. Imagine the shock, the disbelief, the utter dismay. They may have known that a similar expulsion had affected the Jews of neighbouring France in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but few imagined it could happen to them—the greatest community in Europe. Their leaders mobilized all of their resources and all of their allies in the court, but to no avail. They would have to leave everything behind—their synagogues, their cemeteries, everything that was familiar to them.

As the deadline drew near, they were faced with harrowing choices? Should they convert so that they could remain in their homes? Should they go to neighbouring Portugal: the only destination they could reach by land? Would that be any better? If they could book passage on a ship—and there was a limited number of places, with ship owners charging much higher fares than usual—what should be their destination? Another Christian community (e.g., in Italy, which was the closest)? Or should they give up on the hope for Christian tolerance and head for the Ottoman Empire?

The refugees made both choices. Italian Jewish communities, that had accommodated a wave of immigrants from Ashkenazi centres in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, now experienced a new, even larger wave of Sephardi immigrants who established new synagogues and re-invigorated the intellectual life throughout the Italian peninsula. Even more important was the immigration to Ottoman lands. Salonika had no Jews at all in

1490; it was a community created *ex nihilo* by the Sephardi refugees. By 1500, 822 Jewish households appeared on a list, by 1510 there were an estimated 1800 households, and by 1520 more than 3000. A port city in a strategic location of the Mediterranean, Salonika was said to be the only port in the world that closed completely from Friday sunset until Saturday night.

The Great Talmud Torah of Salonika, founded around 1520, had a large central building including a school intended for all the children of the city, regardless of the wealth of their parents, who studied there from age four to thirteen. The best of the students would then move on to study in a yeshiva located in the same complex, which also contained a library, medical facilities, a hostel for travellers, and a factory for weaving garments. The Salonika Talmud Torah soon acquired an international reputation, attested in the writings of contemporary rabbis, and eventually began to attract students from lands as far as Poland. And after the Ottoman Conquest of Palestine in 1516, many immigrants who initially settled in Salonika or Istanbul moved on to create the flourishing community of Safed, one of the greatest centres of Jewish spiritual creativity anywhere in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Once again, evidence of a stunning capacity for regeneration.

#### Nazis:

We turn now to the Holocaust, the theme for our gathering this evening. Even during the war, Jewish leaders outside of the war zone had a fairly clear sense of the historical dimensions of the catastrophe. I would like to share with you passages from two sermons delivered by American rabbis to their congregations to illustrate this point. The first was by my father, Rabbi Harold I Saperstein, given on September 11, 1942, Rosh Hashanah evening, in a synagogue in a Long Island suburb of New York:

The world has been stirred by the fate of Lidice, the little town in Czechoslovakia that the Nazis sought to destroy, in retribution for the assassination of the Nazi hangman Heydrich. ‘Total annihilation’ was the phrase they used. . . . We Jews, unheralded, have had thousands of Lidices. Community after community has been destroyed, communities that . . . now have not a single living Jew. The expressed purpose of the Nazis has been the complete elimination of the Jews from Europe. Fortunately, there are limits to the human imagination. For if we really comprehended what the news items reveal of the unending exile and deportation, the pitiless scourges of famine and disease bound up with ghettoization, the ruthless slaughter, we could no longer eat or sleep. We would not be human if we could ever laugh again. And yet the news reports are understatements of the reality.<sup>1</sup>

The second is by an Orthodox Rabbi in New York, delivered the following year on Yom Kippur 1943:

From the English Channel to the Mediterranean, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from the marsh-lands of Russia to the yellow earth of China, Israel has been defeated. In the past year, two million Jews have been murdered in cold blood, in Hitler's Europe alone. Five millions more are now imprisoned behind thick Ghetto walls and enslaved in his labour camps, driven out of all phases of normal economic life, forced to wear yellow patches and armbands as a badge of shame. Everywhere, millions of Jews have been robbed, despoiled, disfranchised, tortured and degraded.

A little later, shifting from the catastrophe of mass murder and Jewish suffering to the implications for Jewish cultural life, the preacher continues, citing the report to Eli at Shilo about the defeat at the hands of the Philistines:

*Va-aron ha-Elohim nilkacha*, The Ark of God has been taken by the enemy! In every land that has been conquered, in every country that has been vanquished, in every city where the hordes of barbarians have passed, our synagogues have been burned to the ground, the Holy Arks desecrated, and the Sifre Torah, the Scrolls of the Law, trodden and spat upon. Our great schools of learning in Lithuania and Poland are closed; our famous Yeshivoh of Slobodka, Telz, Mir, destroyed, and countless numbers of their scholars, rabbis and leaders tortured and executed. It is in this last phase of destruction, in this capture of the Ark of God, that our greatest danger lies. A danger that threatens the very survival of our people, a danger that imperils the immortality of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Needless to say, the full dimensions of the devastation of European and its institutions was even greater than what was known to these preachers in the autumn of 1942 and 1943. But passages like this rebut the facile condemnations made even by respected scholars, that 'the destruction of the Jews of Europe was all but ignored when it was happening'.<sup>3</sup>

How was regeneration possible after this? Let us think of the survivors. It is surely unnecessary to emphasize the difficulty faced by individual survivors following their Liberation by Allied soldiers, whether from the USSR in Auschwitz 65 years ago to the day, or from Britain and the US in the German camps. You look at these survivors in pictures taken by official Army photographers, and they appear to look back as if from the realm of the dead. Many thousands of them died in the days and weeks after the Liberation, despite the medical attention given to them; their bodies were simply too weak to recover. And in addition to the challenges to their physical health there were severe psychological problems for these survivors. In some cases, they were the only remaining members of their families. Italian Jews like Primo Levi had communities and families still intact to which they could return, but Polish Jews did not; those who tried to return to

their home cities or towns quickly discovered that there was no community left, and that for the most part their Polish neighbours were not exactly thrilled to see them return.

For years, they had lived in an environment where freedom of choice had been largely removed; in the ghettos, and even more so in the camps, every action was regulated and controlled, every infraction of the rules could lead to the most serious consequences. The fear of death was constant; indeed, it could occur at virtually every moment not merely because of violating a rule but because of the whim of an SS officer or a Ukrainian guard. Liberation meant that they were no longer prisoners forced to do slave labour, but they were still not fully free: many were sent to displaced person camps in Europe, with no country that wanted them, or ended up behind barbed wire once again in Cyprus. This was not an easy transition for anyone to make.

And their emotional baggage? Profound *sadness and grief* at the loss of their closes relatives and friends? *Guilt* that they had survived, perhaps by acting in a manner that entailed severe ethical compromise? *Anger* at the rest of the world that had allowed the Nazi mass murder to occur; at the bystanders in their communities that had witnessed their Jewish neighbours being rounded up and removed? *Hatred and thirst for revenge* against anyone associated with the SS, anyone in the German Wehrmacht, any German civilian? What happened to their religious faith? Was it destroyed, pulverized by what they had witnessed? How was a return to normalcy possible after having lived in the concentration camp universe?

Despite these challenges, all but unimaginable to us, many survivors were indeed able to reconstruct their lives on a personal level. Samuel Pisar, for example, wrote a stunning memoir about his wild behaviour at age 16 after Liberation; he was unable to abandon the amoral rules that had allowed him to survive in the camps and became involved in black market activities, until he finally gained control of his instincts, disciplined himself to succeed in his education, and eventually became a renowned and highly influential international lawyer.<sup>4</sup> The contribution in so many areas of life made by survivors is beyond calculation (though in all too many cases we are reminded of this in obituary notices). To mention just a few:

- Rabbi Hugo Gryn, probably the best known and most highly respected rabbi in the country at the time of his death,
- Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize winner, writer and prophetic voice
- David Weiss Ha-Livni, like the Pisar, Gryn, Wiesel, deported to Auschwitz in his mid-teens, the only one of his family to survive; he had been immersed as a child in the world of traditional Talmudic study but after the war became the creator of a new cutting edge methodology called “source-critical analysis” of Talmudic texts.

- Tom Lantos, who died a year and a half ago, the only Holocaust survivor elected to the American Congress.
- And of course Leo Baeck, whose life after the Sho'ah was as much an inspiration as was his leadership of German Jewry before and during the events.

The contribution to all areas of cultural, academic, religious and social life by survivors of the Nazi camps is so great as to be almost immeasurable. But even greater is the loss: how many potential Samuel Pisars, Elie Wiesels, Hugo Gryn did not survive, with a potential contribution that could never be made?

We see evidence of personal regeneration beginning almost immediately, even in the displaced person camps to which many were consigned. Within months the survivors in the DP camps started writing; some 150 periodicals—dailies, weeklies, monthlies, most of them in Yiddish—have been identified in which the survivors wrote not only of their experiences during the war and at present, but of their hopes for immigration to Palestine, their cultural interests in literature, theatre, religion, current events. (Many of these have been microfilmed by the YIVO Institute in New York). These periodicals also provide evidence of classes established in the DP camps; classes in tailoring, in precision mechanics, in agricultural techniques; classes in Hebrew and in English; in traditional Jewish texts: Bible, Midrash, Talmud—many from the very first months following the termination of the war.

There was also evidence in the DP camps of a return to the normal rhythms of Jewish life. We have photographs of the first post-war wedding of B'nai Akiva Jews, the bride and groom eloquently expressing a commitment to life that the Nazis could not destroy. Photographs of Chanukah 1945, with orphaned children lighting the candles that symbolized a rededication to Jewish survival. Photographs of Pesach 1946, a seder with hundreds of participants in the DP camp of Landsberg, the expression on their faces suggesting that the message of liberation had never been so real. Photographs of a mother, her face radiant with joy, holding her new-born infant aloft in an immigrants' settlement in the newly established State of Israel. The contrast between this face and the faces of those survivors of the camps reveals more than three years and a thousand miles. It reveals regeneration, a return to life.

As for the institutions of Jewish life, only a few could be restored in their original locations. The Great Synagogue of Amsterdam, built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and shut down during the Nazi occupation, was indeed resplendent in a service of Thanksgiving at the end of the war. The Great Synagogue of Dohanyi Street Budapest, made into a stable by the Germans during the war, was restored in the 1990s after the end of Soviet rule. But the magnificent Temple of the Reform community in Krakow has no real Jewish com-

munity to worship there, and Jewish life in the heart of Europe of central and eastern Europe is still a pale shadow of what it once was.

Yet Jewish religious and cultural life, which once seemed so imperilled in 1943 when Rabbi Predmesky was preaching that the Ark of God had been captured by the enemy, has in global terms experienced a magnificent renewal. There are still demographic challenges, to be sure: the number of Jews in the world has still not yet recovered to the level it was in 1939. Yet Jewish Studies in Universities of Israel, the United States, and Europe flourish; the number of books published on serious academic investigations of Jewish topics is far greater than it ever was. It is estimated that the number of Jews studying in Yeshivas in Israel and the United States is greater than the number in Poland before the war. Leo Baeck College functions as a transplanted continuation of the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, with current rabbinical students from France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Budapest, and FSU. And new shoots of Jewish life appear even in countries ravaged by the Sho'ah.

How was it possible for Jews in all these periods, who had suffered so much, whose worlds had been shattered, who had lived in the very kingdom of death, to begin once again, returning to the challenges of creative Jewish living? The green shoots at Ein Gedi help us understand. To speak theologically, there was the power of God—not a God who miraculously intrudes into history to destroy the gas chambers and crematoria, but a God who is, to use the biblical metaphor, *mekor mayyim hayyim*, a wellspring of life-giving water, which continues to flow beneath the surface even when the world appears to be in ruins.

And to speak psychologically, these survivors had *roots*, which remained alive when everything around them was being turned to ashes: the roots of faith, of tradition, of memory and of hope. It was these roots that enabled the survivors, and their children and grandchildren, to draw nourishment and sustenance even at the bleakest moments of our history. Humbled by their example, while fully aware of the powers of hatred and destruction and death, we pledge that we will reaffirm our commitment to the power of regeneration, to the central message of our faith: the summons *le-chayyim*, to life.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold I. Saperstein, *Witness from the Pulpit: Topical Sermons 1933–1980* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), pp. 93–94.

<sup>2</sup> Akiba Predmesky, 'The Ark of G-d Has Been Taken', in *Manual of Holiday and Occasional Sermons* (New York: Rabbinical Council of America), 1943, pp. 55, 57–58.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Wisse in *New York Times*, August 8, 1992, A17).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Pizar, *Of Blood and Hope* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980).