

Jebusites

anti-semitism and the oppression of the Jews

by Michael Lazzaro

Many different cultures and societies have come and gone throughout the history of time. One of the longest lasting and earliest of monotheistic idealisms was the faith of Judaism. In the earliest of times they were first called the Hebrew, but it is simpler to call them Jews. Though the Jewish were the pioneers in this religious upheaval, they were both welcomed and un-welcomed by different peoples throughout the known world. The belief in one god that created everything was a radical idea in the days of the polytheistic cultures surrounding the world. Not everyone was accepting of such a counterculture and many despised them for their refusal to blend in with the rest of the spiritual world. Although some were initially accepting, they all ended turning their backs on the Jewish people. Now when anyone says the word "Jewish" followed by "oppression" everyone's mind leaps to the time period of the Second Great War and the attempt by Adolf Hitler's Third Reich to exterminate the entire Jewish population. Though this is considered the most heinous and atrocious acts of genocide ever, it would be a good idea to look back to the past and see that it is not the only oppression or attempt to squash those of this faith. But to first understand why anyone would ever want to be rid of a religious belief, it is most important to understand who the people being oppressed are; not to mention their beliefs and values.

The first thing to remember is that, "Jews are not a race. They are members of every race and have been citizens of many nations. They are women, men, black, white, Asian, Latino, American, European, Russian, etc. Nothing genetic determines Jewishness. There are no single genetic factors which characterize all Jews. Any given physical trait varies as widely amongst Jews as between Jews and other peoples" (Mazza). Remembering that the Jews are a people of faith and not of race is one of my biggest and most irritating angsts. Knowing that, it would be understandable to know that nobody can be sure if a person is a Jew if not seen attending a religious ceremony or owning up to their faith. NAZI Germany took liberties with finding these people and just took it upon themselves to destroy ever person they didn't particularly like (not just Jews). The ancient cultures that fought many fights with Jews were far more accurate and precise in their attempt to destroy the counterculture.

When the first nations were first formed in the current day Middle East, there was one civilization bent on domination and conquest. The Assyrians were the first real military people to dream of conquering the known world. As the Jewish homeland that is now present day Israel, was being slowly conquered, the holy city of Jerusalem was barricaded and fortified to the point where the Assyrian invaders could no longer sustain a steady attack on the city walls. When they realized they had no chance of breaking the city they left for another civilization to take over the fight. "...the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, led his army into Jerusalem and captured the city in 597 B.C.E. He deported thousands of Jews and appointed 21-year-old Zedekiah, a descendant of King David, to serve as king, expecting him to be a puppet ruler. Zedekiah had different ideas, however, and mounted a revolt. After an eighteen-month siege, Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem. Most of the population was deported to Babylon in 586 B.C.E." (Jewish Virtual Library). Bringing most of the Jews to a new location was only because the Babylonians thought they would dissipate and the faith would crumble. They were foiled when a new Persian ruler, Cyrus, allowed the Jews to reclaim their homeland (Jewish Virtual Library).

Soon after the Persians allowed Jerusalem to be a home to Hebrews again, a new force was sweeping through. The Ancient Greeks swept over the world, Alexander the Great took control of Egypt, most of Europe, and the entire Middle East. The Greeks, as we all know, are a polytheistic society and were confounded and perplexed when they met the Jews:

The Jews were likewise confounded. The Greeks were people who valued education and

intellectual pursuits - something the Jews also valued and very much admired. The Greeks spoke a beautiful language, which the Jews appreciated very much. (The Talmud says that Greek is the most beautiful language in the world, it's the only language you can write a kosher Torah scroll besides Hebrew.) Indeed, the Torah was promptly translated into Greek (in the 3rd century BCE) - the first such translation in Jewish history. This translation was called the "Septuagint" after the 70 rabbis who did it. (Spiro)

Many believe that the Greek translation of the Torah would be a good thing, but how wrong we all are. The translations were erroneous on multiple occasions and when re-interpreted again by the Greeks and later into English it created more and more misconceptions about the Jewish religion. The period of peace between these two philosophically different cultures could only last so long, in the year 169 B.C.E. Antiochus Epiphanes takes drastic measures to Hellenize the Jews and brings about the first instance of religious persecution and the trendsetters for many later empires. Antiochus' biggest innovations were the book burnings and the sacrifice of hogs. Not to mention the ban he put on circumcision and all Jewish holidays (Spiro).

So when most of the Jewish world becomes Hellenized the Greeks do the one thing that saves Greek lives and still accomplishes the task of conversion; they turn Jews on Jews. Hellenistic Jews turning on their once fellow worshippers. It was a brilliant idea and although terrible, would be a blueprint for other radical movements throughout history. When true Jews who refused to be turned finally revolted and crushed Greek rule, Jerusalem was retaken and a brief period of peace and rebuilding lasted less than a century. A new empire was forming, the Romans were not going to let the Jewish Kingdom stand and Jews knew what this meant. "After three years of fighting, Herod's Roman-backed army wrested control of Jerusalem and the rest of Judea from the Jews in 63 B.C.E." (Jewish Virtual Library). Jews, again, were at the mercy of another polytheistic society who did not particularly understand the translation of the Torah. It was the Romans that now controlled the known world.

The Roman conquest of the Second Hebrew Commonwealth was more of an accident than it was deliberate war (USA in Iraq the same thing?). The Roman General Pompeii was asked to come to Judaea (northern kingdom of the Jews) to help stop a struggle between the last two heirs of the Hasmonean dynasty as they battled for power of the entire kingdom. Pompeii agreed to help and when

the issue was finally resolved the Romans didn't leave (USA in Iraq the same thing?); they stuck around, for a long time. After the death of Julius Caesar Judaea no longer stayed an occupied state, it was taken for the Empire and added on as the Romans and Augustus pushed East (pbs). Many Jews weren't pleased with the new inhabitants and a new ruler. Although there was a rebuilding of the Jewish sacred temples, many Jews started to get the idea that the city was corrupt and evil; leading most of them to leave and became known as the Essene. These Essene settled near the Dead Sea and started a community of their own, many know of the famous discovery in 1947 and they earned the name The Dead Sea Scrolls. One section of the scrolls describes a rather basic idea of war, the sons of light against the sons of darkness. The Essene took this seriously and gathered its troops and marched against the Romans and Jerusalem; as one could imagine, they were completely undermanned and under-trained to take on such a force, guaranteeing their massacre. Both Jesus and John the Baptist both called for a new kingdom to come about and a free Jewish state to rise again (White). The Romans didn't much like this idea of rebellion and defiance, the Romans set out to find Jesus and have him killed in the year 30 C.E.

Infuriated that the Romans continued to rule and continued to be bigots, Jews started to revolt. Everywhere, all of them, were crushed. Jerusalem was engulfed by the Roman armies and burned to the ground, the Temple of King Solomon was destroyed yet again. "The Temple was no more. Jerusalem had been conquered. Rome had asserted its might and crushed the Great Revolt of the Jews." (Spiro). Jews were devastated but would not give up hope. Revolt after revolt ensued, and every time they did, they were crushed. Jewish unrest became so uniform across the Cosmopolitan world that the Romans just ended up labeling them all as enemies to the Empire! This was not going to help calm the Jews down and only made things escalate quicker. Romans slaughtered Jews at every opportunity they had. Though they had to be careful because if other slaves caught wind of this almost planned genocide, there would be mass upheavals and the Roman state would no longer stand. "When Hadrian took the reigns of power in 117 CE, he inaugurated - at least at first - an atmosphere of tolerance. He even talked of allowing the Jews to rebuilt the Temple, a proposal that was met with virulent opposition from the Hellenists." (Spiro). Pulling a complete change of character towards the Jews, Hadrian decided to build a new temple where the old Temple of King Solomon had once stood; this one dedicated to the Roman god

Jupiter. This was the ultimate travesty, Jews couldn't believe that such a thing was going to defile the holiest of land.

This led to the biggest revolt the Romans would face against the Jews, led by Simon Bar Kosiba started in 132 C.E. and actually managed to liberate Israel and take back Jerusalem from the Romans, though the victory was short lived. Many thought Simon to be the next great Messiah and many rabbis agreed; but for some unforeseen reason the view was changed by later rabbis and proclaimed he was a false Messiah. Hadrian and the Romans weren't going to stand for such tyranny and sent a total of six legions of soldiers to crush those responsible. The revolt cost both sides dearly. The Romans brought in half of their army to deal with the Jews, though there were no great huge battles, it was costly and grueling for both sides. The Jews completely decapitated the 22nd Roman Legion in one fell swoop, and the Romans just kept picking away at small groups of soldiers caught out of place and unguarded. The armies were enormous, everyone knows the tradition of Roman militarism and the vast size of their armies, but the Jews had amassed a huge number of their own, one hundred thousand strong (Spiro).

Though both armies were great, the Jews were crushed after the first taste of victory reached their leader Simon. The final stand was in the city of Betar, unfortunately they would not hold up against the overwhelming Romans. Also unfortunate, and rather ironic, was the date they fell. It coincided exactly with the date that King Solomon's Temple fell, both times. This was the greatest threat the Romans had ever faced, the first real religious war, and they were exhausted. The new idea would be to not let the Jews remain connected to their homeland because that was what was causing all the hostility. Jerusalem was leveled, a new pagan city was to be built. Hadrian named it Aelia Capitolina. All Jews were expelled from the immediate city and those that remained remotely close were only allowed into the city on one day. The same day that they had met their demise on three separate occasions. They were allowed to go to the temple remains and weep for their monumental failure. Romans also put a ban on Judaism, how this is possible is beyond me. Rabbis and Jewish scholars were forbidden to study the ancient books of their faith. The Jewish rabbi that would not conform to these tyrants' mandate, was Akiva. He was made a public example of how serious of an offense practicing Judaism was going to be. During this period of exile, a select few rabbis gathered together and wrote down the six categories of Jewish law, Zeraim, Moed, Nashim, Nezikim, Kodshim, and Taharot. Which described all aspects of

Jewish life and how it should be lived, it is called the Mishna (Spiro).

During the dark time of Roman rule, the rabbis felt that the Mishna was incomplete, there was to be another compilation of Jewish law and life. This was not going to be an easy task in the Roman Empire, since there was already a strong population of Jews in the city of Babylon (outside the Roman's jurisdiction) it was written there and named the Talmud.

The Jews were waiting for their Messiah to come and save them from the Roman oppression. That messiah was named Joshua, but most refer to him as Jesus. Very little is known about Jesus, other than his death, little has been written about his life. Jesus was in fact a Jew and the Romans set up what is now Christianity and Catholicism. The conquest of so many different cultures had left the Romans with over thirty thousand different gods, too many to keep track of or take seriously. During the decay of the empire, the Romans converted to monotheistic Christianity. The only reasons that the Romans didn't convert to Judaism was because it required a strict following that most weren't willing to undertake. Paul stepped in and weeded out the principles that Romans found intrusive on their normal lives. Because he was seen as a traitor to the Jewish faith and the growing complaints, the Romans decided that executing Paul would be the best way of making an understanding between the two cultures. This led to the aforementioned revolt and the decline of the great empire. When the empire split and the Eastern sect would become known as the Byzantine Empire. When the new empire reached Jerusalem any Jew caught in the city was slaughtered. The saviors of the Hebrew are now their bitterest enemies (Spiro).

The rise of Islam just happened to be the saving grace to Jews. The faith between the two is fundamentally the same, there happened to be discrimination between them. When the Arabs took on the Byzantine and Persians they protected the Jews. Jews were allowed to live but in an inferior position; a far inferior position. When Mohammed died there were two successors that jockeyed for power, his cousin Ali and father-in-law Abu Bakr split the Muslims into the Shiites and Sunnis respectively. Though this new found protection seemed like it might be an okay deal, Jerusalem was now a battle ground for the Christians and Muslims. Jews were overjoyed that the Muslims were conquering Europe and all the Christian empires there. This led to a dispersion of Jews throughout Europe. Jews became part of a real community in Spain; allowed to become a normal person in society the Jews entered what could be considered their best days. But as always, these days were not going to last forever, enter the Crusades.

As the feudal system was the only way of life at this time in Europe. This led to advanced militarism and a rebirth of the thirst for conquest. "The Jews were not the only -- and in fact, not the primary -- victims of the Crusaders. Muslims were" (Spiro). The crusades were not just one attempt to take the world back for the Christians, it was in fact, ten different conquests. The first crusade was the retaking of Jerusalem and the slaughter of Muslims and Jews. The second crusade was an attempt to retake lands from the Turks, which failed. The third was another attempt to retake Jerusalem from the Egyptians, which again, failed. The fourth crusade was the retaking of Constantinople. The Children's Crusade was possibly the worst of all because it was no challenge for Muslims to take them as slaves. Six more crusades ended in failure for the Christians and the Muslims held the Middle East (Halsall).

The rest of history is just as cruel to Jews of every nationality. Being expelled and then allowed back in virtually every European nation (mainly when the economy needed stimulating) over the next few hundred years. The torture of the Jews didn't just go on physically or socially; if you were a Jew in medieval Europe, you were taxed for living, dying, breathing, and almost anything else you can think of. Besides being economically vital to a government's success, a ruler would usually be overthrown and possibly executed for incompetence, it was a much simpler task to blame everything on the Jews and keep your head and your social status. "In the 14th century the bubonic plague -- known as the 'Black Death' -- hit Europe. At that time, people had no idea of the causes of diseases and no idea that lack of hygiene caused the spread of bacteria" (Spiro). It has been estimated that almost twenty five million people died, that's about half of the population, from one disease. Jews were the killers of Christianity's God; so it would make sense that they were the ones releasing a plague to kill them. Even though the Church declared otherwise, not many people actually listened. In some towns people were burned at the stake, Jews were killed by the thousands and others were sentenced to the worst part of their respective towns. These designated areas became known as ghettos, with the first being in Venice in the year 1516. Being isolated from the rest of society was a double-edged sword. On one hand, they were among each other, discrimination and prejudice were non-existent in these communities; but on the other side, whenever there was a riot everyone knew exactly where to find the Jews. For years it stayed the same, until Pope Clement IV set down some rules; unfortunately, they didn't do much to help the Jews.

One of the most famous time periods in the history of Medieval Europe is the Spanish Inquisition.

Pope Sixtus IV issued a papal bull (order) on the first of November in 1478. This inquisition was going to reveal those Jews that were converted to Christianity but were still practicing Judaism in secrecy:

Until this day, there exist Christian communities with clear Jewish roots dating back to this time. There are people in the United States (in New England, New Mexico and Arizona) as well as in South and Central America, who are descended from Spanish or Portuguese settlers, and who have strange customs they cannot explain. For example, even though they are Catholics, on Friday night they go down to the cellar to light candles. They don't know the origins of the custom, but they do it. These people are clearly descended from Jews who pretended to be Christians and yet were practicing Jewish rituals in secret. (Spiro)

The first few months of the Inquisition were light and not as nearly as bloody as it is known for. Then a man became Grand Inquisitor, Torquemada, this is when the inquisition got messy and known for its bloodshed. If you converted to Christianity you were automatically suspect and there was almost no way to stop the certain death that was going to follow. The only thing a converted was unsure of, was how much torture they were going to be put under before execution. If you quickly admitted to still practicing the Jewish faith, you were burned at the stake. But there was one way to save yourself from a burning at the stake, if you kissed the cross you would be spared the burning, and strangled instead. If you were a converted, a suspect, and did not admit to it, you were tortured to death. So whether you renounced Judaism or not, you were dead. The Spanish Inquisition was finally abolished in 1834; though it stopped in Spain, there are other countries where Jews were tortured, the last known took place in Brazil in the last few months of the nineteenth century.

The inquisition was only for those Jews who were scared into converting to Christianity, for those that remained faithful, the story is skewed. When the Muslims were finally defeated and their religious hold on Europe was in decline, the protection that Jews enjoyed also went into decline. The Jews were sent into exile all across Europe. If there was ever a curse, this would be it. Every major defeat the Jews suffered came on the date of August second, this one in the year 1492. The same year that Christopher Columbus set his sights on finding a seaward path to the Indies. There is much speculation that Columbus was a Jew, though there were five Jews among his crew, he came from a town that was once completely Jewish, and that he wrote a little Arabic at the top of every page that held the meaning "with

God's help". Which would seem perfectly normal, but it was what Jews had done with their scriptures for years. Another fact that most people don't know, is that his voyage was not funded by Isabella, but two wealthy Jews who had just converted to Christianity were the financial backers. "Louis de Santangel, chancellor of the royal household, and Gabriel Sanchez, treasurer of Aragon" (Spiro). As Jews were evicted from Europe they settled in what is present day Turkey and then The Ottoman Empire. It seems a bit coincidental that Spain drops into a recession and the Ottoman Empire grew.

It seems that every civilization that has been lenient towards the Jews has come to prosper. Apparently God's chosen people may not have an easy task of being the world's punching-bag, but they sure do a good job of it. Even though the single greatest account of Jews being discriminated against happened in the mid-twentieth century, it is nothing new to them. In every great society's rise, prosperity, and fall, Jews have been allowed to live their own lives, have been demoted to the lower half of society, and then full out discrimination, respectively. The moral of the story has to be, be nice to the Jews.

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