

The Talmud records that after the destruction of the second temple, there were Jews who refused to eat meat or drink wine. When questioned about this practice, they replied that it was impossible for them to enjoy food which had been part of the sacrifices offered in the temple. But this answer was not considered to be good enough. By extension, bread and water should also have become prohibited since they, too, were part of the sacrifices. And while it was important to institute some rituals in order to keep present the memory of what had been lost, it was not permitted to inaugurate customs beyond the ability of most people to observe.

I must confess that I am deeply disturbed by what appears to be a parallel process occurring in contemporary Jewish life. There is a painful question being asked today by all kinds of Jews, one which we who represent the wisdom of the tradition are required to answer and respect, however disturbing its implications. This question, simply put, is "Why should I be Jewish?" How we relate to this question and to the people who ask it will, in large measure, determine the strength of our heritage and people in the coming generations. And I fear that we are doing a poor job, because our answers imply a Jewishness so full of guilt that ordinary people will simply not be able to bear the incredible burden it places on them and will, indeed already does, drive them away from our shuls and organizations.

The two reasons for remaining Jewish I find most prevalent in the contemporary press are the Holocaust and the beleaguered position of the State of Israel. Over and over again, we are told that our loyalty to the Jewish people is required out of an obligation to our dead and in order that our ranks remain solid in the great fight we are waging for survival. Israel, people and land, has become our new god and our Jewish credentials are established by the size of our UJA contributions, the frequency with which we mention the holocaust coupled with the implication that we may also become victims, and the ethnic origins of our spouses. Psychologically, I feel that these appeals, invoked daily, encourage an unbearable fear to grow at the core of our souls. The modern Jewish *am ha-arets*, and I count myself one of them, is trapped. On the one hand he is constantly criticized by our secular and rabbinic leadership for having difficulty bearing the burdens which they demand he carry in order to remain in good standing. On the other hand, there is the continual repetition of the "Israel stands alone" theme, implying a latent world-wide anti-semitism only waiting to rear its ugly head in my neighbourhood and among my best friends. And all this takes place in a culture which provides easy escapes, ranging from anonymity to the active embrace of more joyous and rewarding spiritual ways.

Being a Jew has never been easy. I was born only because my grandfather happened to be in London when the Nazis were rounding up supposed communists. And even in this land of plenty, life can still be hard for Jew and non-Jew alike. The question really is, why did all those generations of suffering Jews choose to survive as Jews and not utilize the options to escape which they were offered from time to time.

Shlomo Carlebach came to Victoria just before he arrived in Vancouver. He reminded us that to live as Jews is a great privilege full of joy in the service of the Creator, be He blessed. He told us to take Torah from everywhere and every person; that we are, each one of us, the "most holy" person in the world capable of saving lives

with every act. He filled us with love for each other and for our children, the greatest rebbes. He sang, and we sang and danced with him, not to express our grim determination to survive. Rather, we joined together to be reminded of who we can become, who in fact we already are even though we don't always remember. We sang of the Shabbat we yearn to properly observe, of the angels whose songs we hope to duplicate, of the peace we pray will fill our hearts and our world. We were raised to a spiritual place in which the question of survival need not be asked for we became too busy *being* Jews to question whether we would continue to be Jews. As long as the people of Israel is busy praising His blessed Name, as long as our most basic desire is to bring the light of Torah and mitzvot into our own hearts, then of course *Am Yisrael Hai*, of course we will stand by our brothers and sisters, and of course we will proudly carry on the tradition our martyred ancestors loved more than life itself.

To spend an evening with Shlomo has no comparison whatsoever with a desire for bagels and lox or even for hearing Jewish music. To be with Shlomo is to be reminded of what being a Jew really is, beyond the suffering and struggles of this world, beyond the whims of international politics and the fortunes of war, beyond the self-centredness from which we seek to amass wealth, material security, and testimonial dinners. For to be a Jew is to aspire to hear the sound of the Divine Name eternally emanating from the Sinai within, a sound to which one can respond only with incredible joy and gratitude to all of our forebears who amplified it and kept it resounding throughout history.

“Happy are we! How good is our destiny, how pleasant our lot, how beautiful our heritage! Happy are we who, early and late, morning and evening, twice every day, proclaim:

HEAR O ISRAEL, G-D IS OUR LORD, G-D ALONE!”

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