

Am Yisrael Chai!

“Od Avinu Chai - The Miracle of Jewish Survival”

Lincoln Square Synagogue, Shvat 5784, Feb. 2024



Introduction

This people is not only of remarkable antiquity but has also lasted for a singularly long time... For whereas the peoples of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens and Rome, and others who came so much later have perished so long ago, these still exist, despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried a hundred times to wipe them out, as their historians testify, and as can easily be judged by the natural order of things over such a long spell of years. They have always been preserved, however, and their preservation was foretold... My encounter with his people amazes me.

Blaise Pascal

If statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky way...The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed; and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age,

no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

Mark Twain

The Divine Promise

כֹּה אָמַר ה' נִתְּן שֶׁמֶשׁ לְאֹר יוֹמָם חֹקֵת יָרֵחַ וְכּוֹכָבִים לְאֹר לַיְלָה רִגְעֵי הַיָּם וַיְהִימוּ גְלִיּוֹ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת שָׁמַיִם:
אִם-יִמָּשׁוּ הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה מִלְּפָנַי נְאֻם-ה' גַּם זָרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁבְּתוּ מִהַיּוֹת גְּוֵי לְפָנַי כָּל-הַיָּמִים: (ס)

Thus said the LORD, Who established the sun for light by day, The laws of moon and stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves, Whose name is LORD of Hosts: If these laws should ever be annulled by Me —declares the LORD— Only then would the offspring of Israel cease To be a nation before Me for all time.

Jeremiah 31, 35-36

וְאִף-גַּם-זֹאת בְּהִיוֹתְכֶם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיכֶם לֹא-מֵאַסְתִּים וְלֹא-יִגְעֹלְתִים לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹ-קֵיכֶם:
וְזָכַרְתִּי לְכֶם בְּרִית רְאשֻׁנִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי-אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם לְהַיּוֹת לְכֶם לְ-לִקְיִם אֲנִי ה'

And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD.

Vayikra 26

We are in possession of the divine assurance that Israel is indestructible and imperishable, and will always continue to be a pre-eminent community. As it is impossible for God to cease to exist, so is Israel's destruction and disappearance from the world unthinkable, as we read, "For I the Lord change not, and ye, O sons of Jacob, will not be consumed." (Malachi 3:6). Similarly He has avowed and assured us that it is unimaginable that He will reject us entirely even if we disobey Him, and disregard His behests...Put your trust in the true promises of Scripture, brethren, and be not dismayed at the series of persecutions or the enemy's ascendancy over us, or the weakness of our people.

Rambam, Letter to the Jews of Yemen.

Jewish existence cannot be understood without reference to a living God. And the Jew of today who persists in regarding Jewish survival as a duty, either persists in something unintelligible, or else he postulates, however unconsciously, the possibility of a return to faith in a living God.

Emil Fackenheim

Jewish Actions

Sacrifice

וְכָל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּיךָ שְׁלֵא בְּשַׁעַת הַגְּזֵרָה אֲכָל בְּשַׁעַת הַגְּזֵרָה וְהוּא שְׂעִימָד מֶלֶךְ רָשָׁע כְּנָבוֹכַדְנֶצַּר וְחִבְרִיּוֹ וְיִגְזֹר גְּזֵרָה עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַטֵּל דָּתָם אוֹ מִצְוָה מִן הַמִּצְוֹת. יִהְרַג וְאֵל יַעֲבֹר אֶפְלוּ עַל אַחַת מִשְׁאָר מִצְוֹת בֵּין נְאֻסִים בְּתוֹךְ עֲשָׂרָה בֵּין נְאֻסִים בֵּינוֹ לְבֵין עוֹבְדֵי כּוֹכָבִים

All the above [distinctions] apply [only in times] other than times of a decree. However, in times of a decree - i.e., when a wicked king like Nebuchadnezzar or his like will arise and issue a decree against the Jews to nullify their faith or one of the mitzvot - one should sacrifice one's life rather than transgress any of the other mitzvot, whether one is compelled [to transgress] amidst ten [Jews] or one is compelled [to transgress merely] amidst gentiles.

Maimonides, Yesodei HaTorah 5,3

If you were born a Jew, you are descended from heroes and heroines, who at various points in history, chose to relinquish their property, their homes, and sometimes their lives, for the sake of their religious principles...Masses of other Jews - sometimes the majority - chose to forfeit their core identity as Jews in order to assimilate into the prevailing religious milieu. You are not descended from them.

Sara Yoheved Rigler

ובכל מקום אשר דבר המלך ודתו מגיע אבל גדול ליהודים, ותהי חרדה גדולה צרה כמכבירה אשר כמוה לא נהייתה מיום גלות יהודה מעל אדמתו על אדמת נכר, ויאמרו איש אל אחיו חזק ונתחזק בעד דתינו ובעד תורת אלקינו, מקול מחרף ומגדף מפני אויב ומתנקם, אם יחיונו נחיה ואם ימיתונו ומתנו לא נחלל בריתנו ולא נסוג אחר לבנו ואנחנו נלך בשם ה' אלוקינו, וילכו בלא כח שלש מאות אלף רגלי העם אשר אנכי בקרבו מנער ועד זקן טף

If we live,we will live, and if we die,we will die , but under no condition can we desecrate our covenant. And our heart is not turned back . We will continue to walk in the way of Hashem, our God.

Abarbanel

Survival Instinct

There is yet in this section a hint for future generations, for everything that happened to our father with his brother Esau will constantly occur to us with Esau's children, and it is proper for us to adhere to the way of the righteous by preparing ourselves in the three things for which he prepared himself: for prayer, for giving him a present, and for rescue by methods of warfare, to flee and to be saved. Our Rabbis have already derived this hint from this section, as I shall mention.

Ramban

Judaism

אַלֵּא בְּעֵי מִינְאֵי מִיּוֹדֵי דְאַתּוֹן לָךְ. אָמַר לֵיהּ: תּוֹן לִי יְבֻנָּה וְחֻכְמִיָּהּ

..ask something of me that I can give you. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to him: Give me Yavne and its Sages...

Gittin 56b

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai elects to make a smaller request in order to be certain that his request will be approved. His calculation is realistic, pragmatic, practical, and based on facts. He makes his calculation out of uncertainty as to what exactly the Romans will be prepared to allow. This leader of Israel adopts a self-consciously cautious approach: the spiritual future of the Jewish nation is not to be gambled with, and we do not ignore realistic, practical considerations. Sometimes we are even prepared to suffice with “saving a little,” so long as it is the more certain option.

Rav Aaron Lichtenstein

Few decisions have had more lasting effects. For seventeen hundred years Jews became a people held together by a single thread: study of Judaism's holy texts. In place of the temple came the synagogue, the yeshiva and the bet Midrash. In place of sacrifices came prayer, learning and the performance of good deeds. The mantle of leadership passed from kings, priests and prophets to the Sage, the teacher who “raised up many disciples.” Exiled, dispersed and deprived of power, a shattered nation was rebuilt

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

ומש"כ ידידי איך רשאים אנו לסמוך על חדושים כאלו שבארתי למעשה ובפרט שהוא נגד איזה אחרו' הנה אני אומר וכי כבר נעשה קץ וגבול לתורה ח"ו שנפסוק רק מה שנמצא בספרים וכשיזדמנו שאלות שלא נמצאים בספרים לא נכריע אותם אף כשיש בידנו להכריע, ודאי לע"ד אסור לומר כן דודאי עוד יגדיל תורה גם עתה בזמננו ומחוייב כל מי שבידו להכריע כל דין שיבא לידו כפי האפשר לו

Rav Moshe Feinstein

Education

We are put to shame by the Jews who teach each and every boy and girl to read and write so that they may become proficient in God's law, whereas we only teach our sons to read and write if they are destined for a career in the Church or in the law".

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica

The history of the Jews has been a history of communities built around schools. They are the key institutions because they convey learning. Greek civilisation survived for five hundred years after the Roman conquest of the Greek city-states, because the Greeks, like the Jews, had developed academies and they could live around those academies. When the academies failed, Greek civilisation disappeared. The Jewish people has never allowed its academies to fail.

Prof. Daniel Elazar

As one Holocaust historian, disturbed by the obsessive interest in the Shoah, put it: our children will learn about the Greeks and how they lived, the Romans and how they lived, and the Jews and how they died. Unlike traditional Jewish education, Holocaust education in itself offers no meaning, no hope, no way of life. Unaccompanied by faith, it recapitulates the error of Lot's wife. The Holocaust is a black hole in human history, and if we stare at it too long we will turn to stone.

R Jonathan Sacks

Anti assimilation

Israel has been among the non-Jews many, many years — none of the world's inhabitants could believe the Jewish nation would exist for such a long time in such a miraculous fashion; it is incomprehensible to any intelligent person. For the thousands of years that swept over the diminutive nation, so weak and helpless, it was the way of Hashgachah that they would rest for close to a hundred or two hundred years. Afterwards, a storm wind would emerge and give rise to many waves; it would destroy, decimate, wear them out, demolish, and sweep away without mercy. The Jews would flee to a distant place and there they would reunite into a nation. They would grow, rise up, their wisdom would lead them

to success, until they would forget they were strangers in a strange land. They would think this is the place from which they originated, and lose hope for Hashem's spiritual salvation at the appointed time. There, an even stronger storm wind would come and it would remind them with a raging sound and an earthquake: "You are a Jew. Who made you into a man? Go for yourself to a land you do not know."

When we use our intellect to examine history, we see the alternating pattern of the Jew's situation and his existence among the nations. This is for two reasons: To keep the true religion and its purity, and for the nation's continued existence. For when the Jewish people rest among the gentile nations they will prosper, Torah and its discussion will increase. Their sons will be successful, but they will disagree with their parents. For this is man's desire; the new generation has novel ideas, and more nerve to delve into what was hidden from the previous generation....

ומזה למדו גדולי האומה ובראשם עזרא ואנשי כנה"ג, שגדרו וסיגו האומה בי"ח דבר, להבדל מן הגוים בכל דרכיהם, שידעו ישראל כי הוא אכסנאי וגר בארץ נכריה והוא כשתילי זיתים, שאינו מתערב עם הרכבה אחרת. ולכן אמרו בירושלמי, שאפילו אליהו אינו יכול לבטל, פירוש, כל זמן, שלא בא הגואל ויפסק שעבוד מלכות, אפילו בא המבשר ואמר כי תיכף יבוא, לא יבטלו, שהן הן הדברים המקיימין להאומה בגולה ומזכירין אותו, שהוא ישראל והוא בארץ לא לו.

Meshech Chochmah Bechukotai.

Family and The Home

Dr. Greenberg addressed the question about survival when she spoke about the traditions of the Jewish family. "In times of great danger, Jews responded by having children," she said. The period immediately after the Holocaust, she added, represented the greatest numerical growth of the Jews in history.

"The Jewish family kept the Covenant and the Torah alive," Dr. Greenberg said. The major celebrations in Jewish life, including the Sabbath and sitting shiva, the seven-day mourning period, are observed in the home, she said, rather than the synagogue.

"That, no doubt," she said, "is one of our secrets."

New York Times "Dalai Lama Meets Jews From 4 Major Branches" Sept. 1989

Seeing Meaning even in Exile

That Israel should spread among the unintelligent nations, that those nations learn from them belief in the existence of God and the flow of Providence regarding the particulars of men

Rabbenu Bachye

And behold, our being scattered among the nations until the coming of the Messiah, our righteousness is also to this chosen purpose that his divinity be made known to all the nations that are scattered there.

R Elizer Ashkenazi

Joy and Hope

Jews and Judaism survived because we never lost our appetite for life. Much of Judaism is about holding life in your hands – waking, eating, drinking – and making a blessing over it... Jews are not optimists. We know only too well that the world is full of conflict and hate. But to be a Jew – to know that we have free will, that we can change, that we can apologise and forgive and begin again – is never to lose hope. Judaism is about sanctifying life and having faith in it. And there are times – that evening spent with the survivors was one – when that faith is little less than awesome. That is the meaning of those simple, but perhaps not so simple, words:

“Remember us for life, O King who delights in life, and write us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O God of life.”

Anti Semitism

וְכַאֲשֶׁר יַעֲנֵנוּ אֱתוֹ בְּנֵי יִרְבֵּה וּבְנֵי יִפְרָץ וַיִּלְקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And they were adread because of the children of Israel.

Shemot 1

הן עם לבדד ישכון – לא כדרך כל אומה ולשון, כשהולכים בגולה ומתערבים עם המגלים אותם משיגים בזה אהבה וחשיבות כל אחד בעיניהם, יותר משהיו נפרדים מהם, אבל לא כן עם ישראל, כשהוא לבדד ואינו מתערב עמהם ישכון במנוחה ובכבוד, 'וראו כל עמי הארץ כי שם ה' נקרא עליו' ואין איש מתחרה עמו. ובגוים – כאשר הוא רוצה להיות מעורב עמם, לא יתחשב – אינו נחשב בעינם להתחשב כלל לאדם. [וכיוצא בזה לשון המשנה שביעית (ח,יא) 'ואם מתחשב הוא', [דפירושו שהוא נחשב ומכובד

Netziv

End - A PERSONAL Choice

Diaspora Jewish identity was and is a matter of the mind, not the senses. It belongs to nurture, not nature. We live through what we learn. If we do not learn what it is to be a Jew, nothing in our environment, except antisemitism, will tell us. And antisemitism, while it may remind us that we are Jews, provides no reason for us to want our children to be Jewish. Jews survived, quite simply, because they devoted their best energies to education, their money to schools, their admiration to scholars, their spare hours to study, and their first concern to the tuition of their children. Their identity was constantly learned and relearned, enacted and reinforced, and passed on as a precious gift to the next generation. The secret of Jewish continuity is that Jews cared about it. They created continuity by making the transmission of tradition their first duty and greatest joy.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

"Our survey of three and a half millennia of Jewish history is closed. But the story which we have set ourselves to tell is unended. Today the Jewish people has in it still those elements of strength and endurance which enabled it to surmount all of the crises of its past, surviving thus the most powerful empires of antiquity. Throughout our history, there have been weaker elements who have shirked the sacrifices which Judaism entails; they have been swallowed up, long since, in the great majority. Only the more stalwart have carried on the traditions of their ancestors and can now look back with pride in their superb heritage. Are we to be numbered with the weak majority or the stalwart minority? It is of course, for ourselves, to decide, but in a reading of Jewish history, one factor emerges which may perhaps help us in our decision: the preservation of the Jew was certainly not casual. He has endured through the power of a certain ideal, based upon the recognition of the influence of a higher power in human affairs. Indeed, time after time in his history he has been saved from disaster in a manner which cannot be described as anything but providential. This author has deliberately attempted to write this book in a secular spirit, but he does not think that his readers can fail to see on every page, a higher immanence."

Prof. Cecil Roth