

We're Still Here

It's like waking up in the morning and saying, with wonder: "Well, another day and I'm still here."

Another year and we're still here, we Jews. After all that's happened, especially in the last couple of thousand years.

Towards the beginning of the diaspora, in the year 636 C.E., King Chintila of Spain swore to eliminate all Jews from his realm.



Raab

Two years later, the 6th Toledan Council noted with annoyance that the Jews remained, and launched a new program to get rid of them, one way or another. Fifteen years after that, at the 8th Toledan Council, the reigning king complained bitterly that "while Almighty God has eradicated all heresies in our country, this blasphemous sect alone has not been eradicated." He promised to see to it that, this time, the Jews were either converted or "struck to the ground by the rod of vengeance." But many years later, at the 12th Toledan Council, King Erwig had to arise "with tears in my eyes" to call again for the effort to "eradicate with its roots the Jewish past which constantly comes to the fore in a new form of insanity."

And so it went for another thousand years, through many long-forgotten kings and councils. But we're still here.

Of course, there would have been many more of us, if not for the massacres. On the other hand—with one major exception—most of the Jews who were killed during that past two thousand years could have avoided being killed if they had chosen not to be Jews. But their descendants would not have been among us in any case. It was the Jew who insisted on being Jew to whom we owe our presence, whatever else happened to him. There is the record of the 15th century Jew who, having lost his family and having been expelled from both Spain and Portugal, cried defiantly: "Lord of the Universe, you've done a great deal to me to make me abandon my faith, but be sure that in spite of all who sit enthroned above, I am a Jew and I shall remain a Jew!"

But those Jews did not survive by means of their muscle or military might—nor can we ever long survive by Jewish muscle or might in any modern country, or in any modern world. We are not Romans whose survival is synonymous with the holding of power. In the year 68 C.E., while the Jews fought desperately against the Romans in the besieged city of Jerusalem, Johanan Ben Zakai left the defenders. He capitulated to the Roman General, and by so doing, persuaded the General to allow him to set up a small, innocuous academy at Jabneh. Jerusalem fell, and then Masada; but Jabneh became one of the historic sources of learning on which Jews fed, survived and flourished long after the fall of Rome.

Nor were population numbers ever critical to survival, although often a source of grief. There were as many as half a million Jews lost by conversion between the 13th and 16th centuries. Many of them were false conversions, as in the case of Rabbi Micha who led a group of Jews fleeing a murderous Crusade mob to the local Archbishop, and said, with his own strategy of survival: "I renounce Judaism. When the times have become more peaceful, I will investigate it all more closely, but now baptize us quickly." However tens of thousands remained converted. And, in another time, under other pressures, it is estimated that about a third of the Berlin Jewish community converted freely during the first decades of the 19th century.

But we are still here. There must be significance—for understanding man's history and fate—that we are still here, after all that. And, as dimly as we may understand it, there must be significance for our continuing to be here in the future as Jews, after all that. Anchored in that faith, as the new year begins we find that events still compel us to build new strategies of survival—fitted for the time, but drawn from the lessons of Jewish history. We will not succeed with illusions of our own temporal power, either in the world or in America.