

RH2023-2**4 Jewish Solutions****Rabbi Michel Schlesinger**

When the Israelites were about to leave Egypt, they found themselves in an extreme situation. They had the Red Sea (or the Sea of Reeds) in front of them, and the Egyptians were closing in behind.

How did they react? The Midrash tells us that the Jewish people were divided into four camps. There were those who said, "Let us throw ourselves into the sea." A second group said, "Let us return to Egypt." A third faction argued, "Let us wage war upon the Egyptians." Finally, a fourth camp advocated, "Let us pray to God."

When our people faced an extreme situation, each group's immediate reaction was to cling to a single solution. In my view, each of these solutions represented a different form of suicide. Jumping into the sea meant physical self-destruction, returning to Egypt symbolized the death of their freedom, fighting the Egyptians implied entering an impossible war, and relying solely on prayer to God seemed like counting on an implausible miracle.

The failure of the four camps, in my opinion, lies in the fact that each held themselves apart from the other groups. The Midrash teaches us that a perfect solution for a major challenge does not exist. A viable solution always results from the negotiation of several different alternatives.

Today, 3500 years after that story, the Jewish people is again stuck between two threatening situations: on one hand, we have the possibility of total assimilation and, on the other hand, we have over us the possibility of total self-segregation. And still, we seem to be stuck with the same four solutions, and, more importantly, we seem to be still unable to promote profound dialogue among them. In some way, metaphorically, we are still between the Egyptian army and the sea.

In the 21st century, Jews ask themselves existential questions about how to navigate in a world that is largely not Jewish while remaining faithful to our practices and beliefs.

Can Jews be integrated to the larger society and, at the same time, remain loyal to their set of values? How can Judaism contribute to the advancement of humankind without being obliterated?

In the contemporary world, some Jews believe that the solution to the challenges Judaism faces in different times and places lies in prayer. If we only pray and practice our ancient rituals everything will be fine. A second group of Jews believes that the solution to the challenges Jews face is military. We need to be trained and armed to confront our enemies and defend ourselves. A third possibility to tackle the problems Jews confront is acculturation. By adapting to the different societies Jews live in and have lived in, we assure our survival. Finally, there is a last solution according to which Jews can survive only if they are politically independent; a nationalist solution is the only possibility. In the 21st century, this solution would mean bringing as many Jews as possible to live in the State of Israel.

Let us now delve in depth into each of these possibilities.

The ritual possibility defends the idea that Jewish distinctive behavior is the solution to all of our challenges. Jews have always maintained a relationship with ritual. In different times and places, with varying intensity, Jews have always engaged in the ritual aspects of the Jewish tradition. Rigid Jewish practice in general, and religious services in particular, became, for some Jews, the new holy temple and the solution to all of the Jewish afflictions. Attached to this notion is a messianic view by which the challenges Jews face, such as anti-Semitism or a pandemic, will all be solved by emphasizing Jewish ritual practice.

According to a second group, the solution to Jewish challenges does not lie in a spiritual solution but in a physical one. In this group's opinion, prayer and rituals will not protect us, but a strong army will. Long before the creation of the State of Israel, there were always Jews who believed in the necessity of arming and training Jews to defend themselves. The Bible is full of stories of military battles, and so is our history thereafter. Today, there are Jews who believe that the solution to our challenges lies in strengthening our physical power.

A third group believes that the path to Jewish stability is not through prayer or physical protection, but through the integration of Jews into the different societies they live in. According to this group, the soft power generated by acculturation is the only real strength our people can achieve. In their view, our assimilation into contemporary societies and their values can create a diplomatic web capable of ensuring the stability of Jews wherever they live. According to them, ritual should never prevent Jews from fully participating in the societies they are part of. Furthermore, they argue that military protection will never be sufficient for such a small ethnic group. Therefore, the solution is to integrate as much as possible and become part of the global village. This group undermines the importance of a Jewish state by believing that the more Jews are spread, the better.

Finally, a fourth group believes that the solution does not lie in prayer, physical protection, or integration into the larger society. Instead, they advocate for the creation of a new, separate society. According to this group, national independence is the only possible solution for the Jewish people. According to the nationalist approach, Jews can only navigate in today's world if they independently govern every aspect of their existence. This solution does not come without immense challenges. As we have witnessed in recent months, governing ourselves is an enormously difficult task. It is a blessing and a curse. Since its foundation, the State of Israel has grappled with the question of balancing its Jewish identity and its democratic characteristics.

Each solution taken individually represents a different form of suicide. However, cooperation between Israel and the diaspora, between religious and secular, orthodox and liberal, is the only possible way.

Let me get more personal and share how I integrate the four Jewish solutions for the dilemma between assimilation and self-segregation.

I firmly believe in the importance of rituals and prayer. However, I don't expect world challenges to be resolved supernaturally. When I pray, I don't ask God to magically undo the problems I identify; instead, I seek inspiration to address them on my own.

I am aware of the growing anti-Semitism globally, particularly in the US. Nonetheless, I don't advocate arming Jews for self-defense but rather promoting cooperation with established authorities.

I believe in the positive value of integrating into the societies we inhabit. I chose to pursue a career, attended a non-Jewish university, and studied Law. I read books, visit different museums, and appreciate art that isn't necessarily Jewish. I have friends outside the Jewish community, yet I embrace my Jewish identity in all these activities. I don't feel the need to suppress my particular identity to engage in universal civilization.

Furthermore, I hold a deep affection for Israel. I lived in Jerusalem for four years while completing my Rabbinical Studies. I visit Israel annually, I have lead youth groups there, and I have participated in countless missions. Simultaneously, I don't see living in Israel as the sole solution for every Jew. To me, a vibrant diaspora is as essential as a strong Israel. I believe there are numerous ways to express our Zionism besides relocating to Israel. Despite not residing there or considering it in the foreseeable future, I maintain a profound connection to Israel.

What about you? How do you navigate these different aspects of Jewish identity?

As the *midrash* teaches us, adopting any of the Jewish attitudes to an extreme would represent a form of self-destruction. Conversely, if we succeed in fostering a healthy dialogue among these attitudes, the Jewish experience can promote life.

On Rosh HaShana, we ask, who will live, who will die, who will prosper, and who will face adversity. My answer to this question is that those who cling to a single solution for the Jewish dilemma will find themselves perpetually stuck between the Egyptian enslavers and the sea. However, those who succeed in establishing a healthy dialogue among the diverse ways to be Jewish will be inscribed in the book of a life enriched by a meaningful Jewish existence.

Shana Tova!