

Taking Egypt Out of the Jews

“It was not only necessary to take the Jews out of Egypt; it was also necessary to take Egypt out of the Jews.”—Passover Haggadah

We are a magnificent people—as are other peoples. Despite sometimes Catastrophic hardship and trauma, we have contributed gloriously to our world. Spanning diverse cultures, Jews are known for our humor and resilience, our vitality, intelligence, and warmth. And thankfully, Jewish survival is not at risk now. Then why, ask scholars David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, is Jewish identity today still “founded so centrally...on a history of victimization”?¹ Is this who we want to be, as Jews?

Why is it that, deep inside, many of us still feel beleaguered and powerless, the slaves of Pharaoh, and so behave as if we are still victims? Over generations, we have internalized what has happened to our people, and the terror, grief, and pain live inside us still. Sometimes these erupt when we feel threatened: whether we are truly endangered, or more often, when fear has warped our thinking.

We may sink into “Look what’s been done to us!,” ignoring Jewish resistance, even blaming ourselves or each other for the mistreatment—forgetting that Jewish identity is more than the Shoah or Israel, or suffering. We might wear victimhood like a badge, using past persecution to let us off the hook for our actions now.

Purging behaviors and beliefs that we adopted in response to centuries of demonization is a tall order. And true enough, individual Jews are occasionally violently assaulted, even killed, just for being Jewish. But this is the exception. As a once multiply victimized people, if we don’t work through the inherited wounds, we can become victimizers and perpetuate the damage. Child psychologist/sociologist Alice Miller’s exemplary work describes a related pattern: how “the devastating effects of the traumatization of children take their toll on society, leading to inconceivable violence...and...repetition” of abuse in the next generation.²

The anxiety passed through our families is usually greater than the current reality warrants. Sometimes confusing past with present, our fear ripples out onto those who were not the ones who shipped us to camps, or shot us in shtetls or torched us in medieval synagogues. This is not our fault, but it’s simply not acceptable. We can do better. And as horrendous as Jews’ experience was, it didn’t catapult us into exalted status. We are not the only peoples who have suffered, who feel vulnerable.

Whether we lapse into personal helplessness, victimize family members, or project our terror onto other peoples, even harming them—we need to recover from our trauma. To (compassionately) face our feelings, work through them, heal. To see that we are just as valuable, and usually, just

as wanted, as every other people. No more, no less.

To join with millions of Jews worldwide who are ignoring the voice that whispers we are victims, who resist manipulation by our communal and national leaders, Christian and Jewish, to serve their agendas. To end our cycle of isolated suffering. Instead to ensure human rights, and practice the empathy, solidarity, and joy that is also our heritage.

Litany of suffering

“But what is Jewish identity if it’s not suffering?” Kim asked. “Seriously,” she grinned: “The presumption is we’re gonna be victims unless we keep our eye out for ‘What’s good for the Jews.’” “For many Ashkenazim, we just assume bad things will happen,” Amy replied glumly.

“I’m thinking of my friends,” Kim continued, “who went to Jewish Renewal Yom Kippur services [the Day of Atonement, the holiest religious day for Jews]. They complained that it was ‘too joyful!’ It wasn’t painful enough.”

“But I went to that same service,” Emily protested, flinging her arms. “And I loved it. There was gorgeous music. And it embraced different aspects of the holiday, not just Jews wearing the badge of victim. That’s our history, but how do we move on? Is that what I want to pass on to my daughter? To me, it’s not disowning my Jewishness or what the wounds have been, but it’s also figuring out how to walk better in the world without victimization and shame.

Absently twirling her hair, Elly described learning that she came from “a people of victimhood—almost as if we hoarded it.” She absorbed the teaching not only from her family, “but also from Hebrew school: it was a litany of victimization, almost a pride in being victims. Even more than ‘see what we’ve survived.’”

As if Jews were “the only true victims,” wrote Silva Tennenbaum, who fled Hitler in 1938.³ How might it shift our isolation to let ourselves feel connected to other Nazi victims: the Roma (Gypsies), commies, gays, trade unionists, and the physically/mentally disabled, more? As if no other people have endured horrific holocausts—different, but genocides just the same—in Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia?

Elly continued, “It’s almost like we think being victims makes us purer, like we’re operating from some high moral code. As if we’re better people because we’ve been hit by oppression rather than being oppressors. But it’s not true! Look at the Jews in power in Israel. It doesn’t matter that it’s the same generation that survived Nazism. They turn around and do some of the same kind of genocidal behavior. I think we’ve brought suffering almost to a point of holiness—and it justifies everything. Then you don’t have to take responsibility for the power and privilege you have.”

Ariana Melamed, columnist for Israel’s daily, Yediot Acharonot, admits

the same. “We are victims so we are allowed:… When the IDF showers Gazan civilians with molten lead, questions must not be asked in wartime and mistakes must not be admitted to…[But] being relatives and children of victims does not justify our own injustices…[or free us] of the lesson that is as important as sovereignty and power: the duty to create a moral society that is sensitive to injustice.”⁴

From the receiving end of this dynamic, African American literary giant James Baldwin wrote, “It is galling to be told by a Jew whom you know to be exploiting you that he cannot possibly be doing what you know he is doing, because he is a Jew.”⁵

And it’s also true that anti-Semitism (and sometimes, attacks on Jews) exists. Referring to both ends of the spectrum, Elly confides: “In my own healing process, I’ve come to loathe victimization because I’ve carried so much of it. I’ve also gone to the other extreme of ‘Huh! Anti-Semitism is nothing in America compared to the real oppression of racism. Anti-Semitism is like a toothache.’ So it’s been a process of validating for myself, ‘Wait a minute, anti-Semitism doesn’t have to be the same as racism to be important.’ In fact, it minimizes both to compare, even though sometimes they almost beg for comparison.”