

Fear Beyond Fright: Jewish Responses to Tragedy

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Introduction

This paper seeks to provide a preliminary investigation into how Jews respond to fear-inducing experiences. In particular, it will focus on two of the most harrowing experiences of Jewish history: the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans and the Holocaust. What terminology has been used to describe these experiences? How has the memory of these events evolved over the generations, and can the process of adapting to the more ancient experience predict how Judaism will evolve as a result of the more recent? Each of these questions would take a book to answer. But even initial discoveries may yield practical outcomes: the best predictor of future responses to fear is most certainly the past.

Vocabulary and Historiography of Fear

Language both frames and reflects cultural attitudes towards particular experiences. Within Jewish thought, responses to fear may be seen through the lens of the two main words used to describe the emotion in the Hebrew Bible: *Yirah* and *Pachad*.¹ *Yirah* maintains a more positive connotation, as in awe or the majesty that God invokes.² *Pachad*, by contrast, signifies

¹ Other Hebrew words for fear include *chared* (fear-induced trembling) and *bahal* (profound fear). However, they are used more infrequently and may themselves be categorized to a large extent within the *yirah/pachad* dichotomy.

² We first see the use of *yirah* in Genesis 15:2, just before God promises Abraham a multitude of offspring, even at Abraham's old age: *Al-tirah Avraham*, "Fear not Abraham" (JPS). More aptly, it would seem that God is telling Abraham not to be awestruck by the message he is about to be given. We next hear of *tirah* in

outright fright or terror.³ In many respects, these terms mirror the eustress and distress that inspire each emotion. The *yirah* felt at the start of an interaction with the Divine may also be felt to a lesser degree at beginning of a major opportunity or conclusion of an impressive display of prowess; *pachad* may be inspired by God's anger, even as it is by mundane scares and frightful occurrences in a more muted way. *Yirah* (awe-full regard) and *pachad* (fright) define the type of emotion experienced, while the particular situation determines the degree to which that emotion is felt.

Within this continuum of fearful emotion, starting with the *Tenach* (Hebrew Bible) itself, I suggest that the Jewish people have exhibited at least five major coping strategies throughout history: 1) adapt an existing tradition, as in the codification of the *Mishneh* in the third century as a written guide to Jewish law and practice; 2) create a new tradition, such as the mysticism that emerged following the expulsion of Jews from al-Andalus by the Almohads; 3) avoid the cause of fear, as the Jews who left Spain did as a result of the Inquisition; 4) appease the oppressors, as did the Jews who paid ransom money to rescue their coreligionists from Crusaders; and 5) create a new shared experience, as the *chalutzim* who settled Palestine did on Kibbutzim to establish the archetype of the independent "new Jew." Of significance, three out of five of the responses that are *remembered* in the Jewish tradition are active in nature. Only avoidance of the cause of fear and appeasement of the oppressor are submissive, suggesting that even in rationalizing the more terrifying experiences of the past two millennia, the Jewish people has in large part reacted actively – at least from an internal perspective.

Genesis 26:24, when God reaches out to Isaac one night in Beersheba: "Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham" (JPS).

³ In First Samuel 11: 7, for example, *pachad* is used to denote "Terror from the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one man [together]" (JPS).

It is important to note that while records of active responses to fear seem significantly represented in Jewish historical records, they may not in fact be representative of reactions exhibited by the ‘typical’ Jew in a given situation. Rather, they may have survived as heroic exceptions within a fearful population. Yet even if unrepresentative of Jewish responses to fear, they comprise prominent features within Jewish historical memory⁴ and therefore are most likely to impact future Jewish responses.

Even when taking into account the bias towards chronicling active responses to fear within Jewish historical records, two of the greatest tragedies in Jewish history appear to have produced more dramatic, even seismic shifts in Jewish theology and worldview: the destruction of the Second Temple and the Holocaust. The more ancient of the two enabled rabbinic Judaism to emerge as the dominant form of Jewish life – but not without a prolonged period of mourning and self-doubt about what the Jews could have done to induce what appeared to be a Divinely inspired act of retribution. Answers to this question varied greatly, from the more simplistic interpretation that acts of “senseless hatred” (*sinat chinam*) between Jews inspired God’s wrath to Maimonides’ more nuanced view that the destruction of the Second Temple was in fact a Divine gift, supplanting the ritual cult with rabbinical guides to ethical behavior. The destruction of the Temple was interpreted and reinterpreted. Maimonides’ well-known understanding of the destruction of the Temple, for example, occurred well over a millennium after the event itself had taken place, and even today contemporary Jewish theologians grapple with the destruction of the Second Temple as it relates to their broader construal of Jewish historiography and ethics.

⁴ Historical memory documents how people perceive and interpret the past and compare it to the events as understood through primary source documentation; it is an emerging subspecialty within history. While the subfield of historical memory has significant limitations, it offers a profound opportunity to understand the mindset of Jews who experienced fear in different historical periods.

My contention is that the Holocaust will ultimately prove to be an equally defining turning point in Jewish thought. One third of all Jews in the world were brutally exterminated in less than a six-year period. What are this modern tragedy's implications about Jewish life, ethics, and history? How should Jews respond when faced with anti-Semitism? When is force appropriate, and when must it be eschewed? What communal institutions would best defend and support Jewish communities in the Diaspora? Are Jews still a "chosen" people if left for the slaughter? While many preliminary answers have come to the fore, it may be generations or even centuries before the Jewish tradition has garnered broader lessons from the frightful experience of the Holocaust and fully incorporated them into our religious practice. I am optimistic that such lessons will not only challenge Jewish scholars but potentially even revolutionize the communal practice of Judaism, much as the destruction of the Second Temple did two millennia ago.

Case Study 1: Rabbinic revival as response to the destruction of the Second Temple

When Roman legions destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem, after a rebellion failed to rid the Jews of their powerful and periodically oppressive overseers, it appeared that Judaism itself might too disappear. Aside from the sheer devastation that the armies wrought, the event created major theological quandaries. If Jews communicated with God through sacrifices at the Temple, would they lose touch until a new one was erected? If God were powerful, how could He allow this to happen? Were the Jews still God's chosen people? The problems were manifold, but over time, Jews found comfort in the emerging rabbinic traditions and leadership. While fear and suffering were immediate, rabbinic Judaism grew to become the dominant stream of Judaism in the span of a few generations. In time, it managed to fill the void left by the Temple

establishment and institute a form of Judaism that many practitioners and scholars consider superior to what had existed before.

Rabbinic Judaism took form within the Pharisaic traditions of Judea during the Second Temple Period, which stretched from the completion of the Second Temple in 516 B.C.E. until the fateful Bar Kokhba Rebellion against the Roman Empire in 132 C.E. that dashed the last hopes of rebuilding it.⁵ Towards the middle of this defining epoch of Jewish history, sectarianism emerged, with at least three major groups jockeying for power and legitimacy: the Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Essenes.⁶ On one extreme, the Sadducees represented the Temple's priesthood, which was supported by Judea's aristocracy and maintained a great deal of symbolic and material clout. On the other, the Essenes lived ascetic lifestyles, seldom marrying and sequestering themselves in rural communes.⁷ Between the elite and those unwilling to remain a part of the society resided the Pharisees, who received popular support and were known for their love of study. Rich and poor alike were welcomed into their ranks, provided they had a sharp wit and willingness to work hard. Unlike the Sadducees, who kept the secrets of the Torah locked within the Temple compound in Jerusalem and the Essenes who withheld it in their compounds in the countryside, the Pharisees sought to make the Torah accessible to the thinkers

⁵ Ben-Sasson, H.H., ed. *A History of the Jewish People*. London: Weidenfeld, 1976: pages 172, 303, 325. The Bar Kokhba Rebellion is not to be confused with the Great Rebellion that provoked the Roman Legions to destroy the Second Temple in the first place.

⁶ Stone, Michael Edward. *Scriptures, Sects and Visions*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980: page 74. Since the Zealots were more of a political faction than a spiritual one, I have omitted them from this discussion. Also, a growing school of scholarship holds that there were many more factions within Judaism, of which we only have clear records of three. These divisions are primarily based on the historical account of Flavius Josephus and have defined the "mainstream" of Jewish historiography about the end of the Second Temple Period.

⁷ Michael Edward Stone in his work, *Scriptures, Sects and Visions* theorizes that the Essenes may have "become a sectarian community because of their opposition to the expulsion of the Zadokite line from the High Priestly office" under the Hasmonians (75 -76).

of Judea. Among the Pharisaic adherents were many priests and scholars, who meticulously studied the Torah and made use of an oral tradition to help explain its meaning. This ever-evolving oral heritage enabled the Pharisees to adapt the teachings of the Torah to new circumstances.

The Pharisees took full advantage of this flexibility after the failed Jewish rebellion from 66 to 70 C.E. prompted Roman rulers to level the Second Temple.⁸ Jewish zealots within the population had challenged the Roman Empire's sovereignty over Judea and were soundly defeated. Rome devastated not only the rebels, but Jewish society more broadly. The Essenes were all but wiped out in the course of the war, while the Sadducees, who had relied on the Temple for legitimacy, lost the symbol of their power and ritual purpose.⁹ What remained of the razed Temple and terrified society was the tradition of the Pharisees. Their broad base of support and dependence on multiple academies rather than a single religious holy site sustained this intermediate sect in the midst of the destruction wrought by the Romans. The tradition proved flexible enough not only to withstand a second abortive revolt in 130 C.E. but to sustain the Jewish people for two millennia, even after Judea was abolished as a state altogether.

Central to the reestablishment of Judaism after the fall of the Second Temple was Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, a top scholar and Pharisee who, though born a priest, was critical of the distance that priests placed between themselves and ordinary people.¹⁰ He was said to have

⁸ It appears that a significant enough number of Essenes took part in the Great Rebellion for the Romans to essentially wipe them out (according to Josephus). Please also note that there were some places that held out until 73 C.E. However, by the time Jerusalem was taken, the result of the Rebellion had already been determined

⁹ *Understanding Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*. Jersey City, New Jersey: Ktav, 2003: page 277.

¹⁰ Ben Sasson, 319 – 320.

escaped the siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. in a coffin, smuggled by his students to safety outside the city.¹¹ Though it is clear that he reemerged in Jabneh following his unlikely escape from the besieged Temple complex, the circumstances of his arrival and work to refashion rituals previously centered around the Temple remain enmeshed in conflicting accounts. What we do know from these sources is his that he worked tirelessly to reconvene the Sanhedrin – the High Court of rabbinical sages previously seated at the Temple – and adapt Jewish practices to an era without a central ritual cult.¹² Fear that Judaism would be lost in the chaos of Roman oppression sparked what became an unprecedented movement for Jewish renewal.

A major factor that contributed to Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai's revival of Judaism from its state of disarray was the institution of the synagogue. The synagogue had existed both in the Diaspora and Land of Israel during the Second Temple Period and provided a center for communal worship and gathering. While its rituals had been based around the Temple – such as the three daily worship services timed to coincide with the sacrifices taking place in Jerusalem – it provided a blueprint for Jewish communal life. In fact, during the epoch of the Second Temple, the idea of prayer, rather than sacrifice, as a means of worshiping the divine had become so prevalent that a prayer room was established within the Temple complex itself.¹³ Because of the emergence of synagogues, a network of Jewish communities was already in place by the time of the Temple's destruction. The Jewish High Court in Jabneh, once it gained legitimacy, could

¹¹ Ben Sasson, 319 – 320.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Schiffman, 275.

then focus its efforts on honing and administering Jewish law and establishing schools and synagogues.¹⁴ It had no need to devise a Jewish communal structure from scratch.

Under Rabbi Johanan and the other rabbinic authorities of Jabneh, a remarkable culture of learning coalesced. Students came from afar to study under the rabbinic sages of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Supreme Court), eager to learn Jewish law and in time earn rabbinic ordination.¹⁵ Students often studied under multiple sages, shifting from one to the next until they found one whose teaching style and understanding of Jewish law meshed with their own.

Ironically, the destruction of the Temple and resultant fear it provoked in many respects led to the enrichment of Jewish thought. A meritocracy in which wealth and ancestry were of far less importance replaced the rigid class structure. Moreover, the lower-class origins of the Pharisees compelled their rabbinic heirs to emphasize social justice and practicality far more than their Sadducee counterparts had in Second Temple Judaism. While the trauma and *pachad* (fright) at having a seemingly infallible Temple razed cast a pall over the period, Jewish life was rekindled – from the historical vantage point – with remarkable speed under the auspices of rabbinic Judaism. Arguably, what had been lost was replaced by an even more impressive tradition, which gained widespread support in the Jewish Diaspora and provided the foundation for Judaism as we understand it today.¹⁶

The weighty history of Judaism during the Second Temple Period reveals both the remarkable hope that initially compelled Jews to fight for their autonomy in two fateful uprisings

¹⁴ Ben Sasson, 323 – 325.

¹⁵ Ibid, 327 – 328.

¹⁶ Schiffman, 277.

and the stark realization that independence could not be achieved in the foreseeable future. In many respects, it is the burden that Jews bore throughout the Diaspora. Had God turned on the Jews? Were they destined always to be “strangers in a strange land” or even slaves, as they had in Egypt?¹⁷ Yet the remarkable tradition of rabbinic Judaism proved to be such a gift that Jews also felt privy to a marvelous intellectual and spiritual fortune, which was to be cherished and preserved.¹⁸ With the Torah as their mainstay and the compilations of Jewish legal texts and commentary (*Mishneh* and *Gemarah*) as guides to its interpretation, the Jews had built an intellectual temple that could replace the physical one that was lost. The *pachad* (fright) caused by Roman brutality roused a tradition that inspired *yirah* (awe) for generations and which may never have otherwise endured.

Case Study 2: Evolving response to the Holocaust

The Holocaust is one of the only events in Jewish history comparable to, if not more terrible than the brutalization of Judea during and after the Great War with Rome. While the Holocaust’s impact is still felt generations after the event itself ended, the full extent to which it will influence Jewish theology, practice, and culture remains to be seen. It is difficult to forecast what may emerge within Judaism, as it evolves in the coming centuries and incorporates the terrifying experience of the Holocaust into the belief system and the collective memory of its practitioners.

¹⁷ The claim that Jews had been slaves in Egypt is based on the Torah and has come under dispute in recent years by archaeologists.

¹⁸ Wylen, Stephen M. *The Jews in the Time of Jesus*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995: page 186.

Even so, the Holocaust itself merits examination as a study of how Jews reacted to oppression and fear at the hands of the Germans. Raul Hilberg, one of the founders of Holocaust Studies, presents a daring thesis about their response in the introduction to his magnum opus, *The Destruction of the European Jews*:

The destruction of European Jewry was fundamentally the work of German perpetrators.... Yet every day German exertions and costs were being affected by the behavior of the victims. To the extent that an agency could marshal only limited resources for a particular task, the very progress of the operation and its ultimate success depended on the mode of the Jewish response.¹⁹

This reaction, Hilberg argues, was formed following the destruction of the Second Temple, when the best Jewish response to anti-Semitism was to mollify the oppressor or flee the locale. As a result, the Jews worked towards the “alleviation” of threats and pogroms through “petitions, protection payments, ransom arrangements, anticipatory compliance, relief, rescue, salvage, reconstruction.”²⁰ They did so even when the Nazi plot against the Jews turned out to be far more than an episode of anti-Jewish foment and one that may have warranted, in retrospect, resistance and even an outright revolt to prevent it.

Hilberg’s thesis has proven controversial, with Daniel Goldhagen²¹ contending that the destruction of European Jewry could be attributed singularly to the attributes of German society

¹⁹ Hilberg, 22.

²⁰ Hilberg, 22.

²¹ See *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996).

and Hannah Arendt²² furthering the idea that the “atomization” of a population under dictatorial rule, such as that of the Nazis, is what facilitates barbarism on the part of the rulers. Hilberg’s thesis rests carefully between these two extremes, neither negating the agency of ordinary Germans in enabling the massacre of Europe’s Jews (as in Arendt) nor blaming Germans and their culture entirely for the Holocaust (as in Goldhagen). As such, Hilberg offers a more plausible account of events that may never truly be explicable.

Hilberg suggests that the Jews had learned from historical experience – particularly during the Middle Ages in Europe – to avoid confronting those perpetrating anti-Semitic violence for fear fomenting further atrocities. The most common of the Jewish responses to fear in Europe since the Middle Ages, therefore, have been appeasement and avoidance; events that provoke *pachad* (fright) resulted in acquiescence in order to minimize injury, loss of life, and loss of livelihood. Hilberg elucidates,

The Jewish posture in the face of destruction [during the Holocaust] was not shaped on the spur of the moment. The Jews of Europe had been confronted by force many times in their history, and during these encounters they had evolved a set of reactions that were to remain remarkably constant over the centuries... Preventive attack, armed resistance, and revenge were almost completely absent in Jewish exilic history.²³

According to Hilberg, Judaism adapted to the adverse circumstances of exile from Judea in the second century and eschewed armed resistance as a viable response to violent outbursts of anti-Semitism.

²² See *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

²³ Hilberg, 22.

Hilberg's claim rests on the assumption that information was passed on by Jews who survived or witnessed pogroms throughout the Middle Ages, creating a collective memory of responding to force through acquiescence. This notion is supported by the fact that Jews possessed a common written language and traveled widely for purposes of trade,²⁴ scholarship, and the search of better living conditions. Jews from one region could thereby easily relay their experiences to those in another, creating a high degree of shared memory and wisdom about how to approach adverse scenarios. Moreover, the rabbinical legal system ensured a high degree of communication between communal leaders, as rabbis made precedents and sought each other's advice on challenging cases within Jewish law.

The Holocaust, according to Hilberg, may therefore be construed as an event in which the Jewish communities of Europe dramatically miscalculated the actions that would "result in the least damage and least injury" based on past experience.²⁵ The calculation to concede property and personal freedoms to the Nazis was intended to minimize damage, but ultimately hastened the demise of European Jewry and enabled the efficient bureaucratic apparatus of the Nazis to annihilate a third of all Jews alive in the world at the time. Because of the gruesomely efficient Nazi bureaucracy, Jews no longer served an essential administrative function (as Hilberg argues they had in previous regimes throughout history) and could thereby be wiped out entirely without a significant cost to German society.

²⁴ Trade was facilitated by one of the earliest systems of international law, *Halacha*, which was enforceable and highly uniform its application. Trade was also one of the few jobs open to Jews, who were in large part prohibited from owning land.

²⁵ Hilberg, 23.

The failure of “learned” responses to anti-Semitic aggression during and leading up to the Holocaust has already prompted major shifts in the historical memory of the Jewish community and self-critical rebukes as searing as those present after the fall of the Second Temple. As far back as 1942, when reports of mass executions began to make their way into Jewish newspapers (and to a shockingly small degree into the mainstream media), significant segments of American Jewry have criticized their leaders for their insufficient responses.²⁶ Jewish leaders’ unspecific recommendations to President Roosevelt in December 1942, followed by the adamant inaction of President Roosevelt in the subsequent months delayed any meaningful response by the United States until the beginning 1944.²⁷ Only under pressure from Congress and the U.S. Treasury (rather than from Jewish organizations) did Roosevelt establish the War Refugee Board (WRB) by way of executive order. While estimates suggest that WRB may have saved as many as 100,000 – 200,000 lives, Professor David Wyman of the University of Massachusetts concludes that “Strong and persistent pressure after the War Refugee Board was formed [in 1944] would have been necessary to have forced the Roosevelt Administration to give the board the support it needed for a maximum rescue effort.”²⁸ Within Jewish historical memory (and arguably primary source documents themselves), it is clear that Jewish leaders were unable to convince President Roosevelt to save their coreligionists from near-certain death.

The inability of the American Jewish community to garner and maintain public and political support for the effort to save European Jews has left an enduring imprint on the

²⁶ David S. Wyman. “The American Jewish Leadership and the Holocaust.” Randolph L. Braham, ed. *Jewish Leadership During the Nazi Era: Patterns of Behavior in the Free World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985: pages 1 – 5.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 7 – 24.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 26.

American Jewish psyche, much as it has on that of Jewish communities around the world. Acquiescence in continental Europe coupled with impotence abroad dramatically altered the Jewish response to *pachad* (fright) from that which Hilberg determines to be the pre-Holocaust mentality of most Jews. Rather than seeking to mitigate anti-Semitism through diplomacy or compliance with a given regime, the Jewish community came to see collective action and even outright resistance as desirable and praiseworthy responses to fear. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising against the Nazis and the work of Zionists to establish a safe haven for Jews in spite of British equivocations became emblematic of the new Jewish ethic of resistance and self-sufficiency.

Recent events have added further nuance to the Jewish response to the Holocaust and somewhat softened the intense need to feel independent and capable. Widespread efforts by Jews and non-Jews alike in the United States to memorialize the Holocaust through monuments, museums, and education programs have dampened the sense of mistreatment and impotence that Jews felt after the Holocaust. With ample *lieux de mémoire*²⁹ in the public sphere and secular society, American Jews have had their sense of helplessness and mourning partially transformed into a feeling of acceptance by the broader society in a way unprecedented since the destruction of the Second Temple.

This evolving emotional response on the part of the American Jewish community has been hastened by the growing sense that Israeli military actions since the 1967 War may have contributed to the elusiveness of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. With recent polls indicating that the vast majority of American Jews support the Middle East peace process, the feeling that Jews must act unilaterally to protect themselves has been tempered by the realization

²⁹ “Places of Memory” is a term coined by French historian Pierre Nora and includes memorials, monuments, works of art, etc.,

that multilateral action may on occasion save lives on all sides and be both the more prudent and ethical course.³⁰

Conclusion

Reactions to the Holocaust continue to evolve, much as reactions did to the destruction of the Second Temple. These two events, perhaps the most traumatic in Jewish history, share remarkable parallels. The initial *pachad* (fright) that the Jewish community experienced after the fall of the Second Temple morphed into *yirah* (awe) at the remarkable work of the Mishneh. What had seemed an insurmountable blow to Judaism became a transformative force for reform, change, and redirection within the religious tradition.

Analogous trends appear to be emerging as the Jewish community continues to reestablish and redefine itself in the generations after the Holocaust. Fear of insufficient action has been tempered by the realization that overzealous self-defense can too hold negative consequences; concerns about the hostility of others to Jews have been mollified by the abundance of public memorials in the United States and Western Europe for the Holocaust and education programs seeking to promote tolerance. While the ultimate results of Jewish *pachad* (fright) and trauma during the Holocaust remain to be seen, it would be unsurprising if they prove to be as remarkable as the rabbinic tradition did when it emerged over nineteen centuries ago from the ruins of the Second Temple. Fear of the most terrible sort may yet again prompt results worthy of awe, as its causes are studied and adapted to throughout the generations.

³⁰ Eric Fingerhut. "New J Street poll: American Jews want U.S. engagement in peace process." *Jewish Telegraph Agency*. March 23, 2009. <<http://blogs.jta.org>>.