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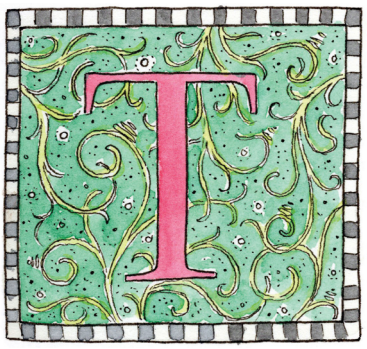
The Mystery of Jewish Resilience

Why do the Jews still exist?



THE ENGLISH WORD "resilience," from the Latin *resilire*, literally means "to rebound." For most of its 400-year history, the term was understood as a property of an object. The resilience of a material was determined by its ability to bounce back under stress and resume its original form or shape.

In recent decades, this *mechanical* sense of resilience has given way to two other conceptions — a *homeostatic* understanding centered on the capacity of complex systems to withstand disturbances and regain equilibrium through self-regulation, and a *psychological* understanding focused on the power of individuals and cultures to persevere through often extreme adversity and hardship. As opposed to resilient materials or ecosystems, a resilient person acts with intention and agency. While nature and nurture may condition

certain people to be more resilient than others, psychological resilience can be learned, cultivated, strengthened, even chosen.

Resilience requires the interdependence of two ostensible opposites: *tenacity* and *flexibility*. A skyscraper can maintain its structural integrity in extreme winds and earthquakes only if it is flexible enough to sway slightly. It has to bend not to break. The same is true of resilient people: Their perseverance reflects their ability to *adapt* to adverse and often searing events rather than just rigidly endure them. With the increasing tendency to view resilience as a human capacity, some have come to construe the term itself differently. Resilience today signifies not so much a reversion to a previous state or mindset as the creation of a new normal. The phrase "I am not the same person I was before *x*" has become somewhat hackneyed. Yet it certainly reflects how many Jews, in both Israel and the Diaspora, feel at this moment, more than 200 days after October 7.

The most perplexing element of the history of the Jews is that there are still Jews at all. The philosopher Simon Rawidowicz once argued that fear of the impending demise of Israel, the "everdying people," is the leitmotif of their history from desert rovings to the catastrophes of the 20th century. "The world makes many images of Israel," he wrote, "but Israel makes only one: that of a being constantly on the verge of ceasing to be." But even if a tendency toward worry is deeply embedded in the Jewish collective psyche, the resilience of Jewishness across millennia of upheavals, displacements, dispersions, persecutions, conversionary and assimilatory pressures, and violence to the point of attempted annihilation is something of a conundrum. "All things are mortal but

the Jew," Mark Twain wrote in 1898. "All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

Traditionally, Jews and Christians offered supernatural explanations for this phenomenon. Jews viewed their survival in exile as proof that the special relationship initiated between God and Israel at Sinai remained not only operative but eternal. With some exceptions, they interpreted their scattering as a consequence of their failure to uphold the terms of the covenant — "Because of our sins we were exiled from our land," we acknowledge in the festival liturgy — while believing that the covenant nonetheless endures. Despite denying that Jews remained God's chosen people, Christians likewise came to see the survival of the Jews as punitive yet providential. For Augustine, the most influential of the Church Fathers in shaping Catholic doctrine vis-à-vis Judaism, Jews were embodiments of biblical literalism ("living letters of the law") and theological "witnesses" who through their very subjugation and marginalization within Christendom attested to the supersession of the synagogue by the church.

These supernatural and theological explanations for Jewish survival gave way to secularized ones in early modern Europe, beginning with Spinoza. Spinoza ridiculed the idea that the Jews had endured centuries of statelessness because of divine chosenness. Neither miraculous nor mysterious, their continuity could be attributed to natural causes — a vicious circle of Gentile hatred and Jewish stubbornness in clinging to antiquated rituals such as circumcision. The notion that ending or at least curbing the exclusion of Jews would corrode Jewish communal solidarity became a pillar of emancipationist ideology and axiomatic to non-Jewish Enlightenment thinkers such as Christian Dohm and Henri Grégoire.

Spinoza's demystification of the survival of the Jews suggested that there was no raison d'être for their continued existence. Others would later seize on this view in developing a philosophy of history.

For German idealists such as Kant and Hegel, it was plain that Judaism had long outlived its mission and purpose and survived only as a kind of archaic trace or vestigial organ. In his classic multivolume *A Study of History* (1934–1961), the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee notoriously described Judaism as a "fossil relic of a dead civilization." The echoes of Christian supersessionism endure here, sans the conviction that the preservation of the Jews is in any way providential.

Today's scholars have also tried their hand at unraveling the enigma of Jewish continuity. In his 2017 *Jewish History: A Very Short Introduction*, David N. Myers acknowledges, per Spinoza, that the fact that Jews have "consistently been disliked" has played a role in their endurance by fortifying "their sense of being a distinct people." Yet he also underlines the importance of Jewish responsiveness and adaptability to the various geographic milieus into which they moved or were thrust. Here he is guided by Gerson Cohen's classic 1966 essay, "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History," which claims that Jews have survived not in spite but because of their often-extensive interaction with non-Jewish languages, religions, and cultures. By selectively absorbing and tweaking the linguistic forms, cultural frames, and intellectual currents of their Gentile neighbors even as they maintained their communal borders — be they physical or invisible — Jews kept Judaism from petrifying, contrary to what Toynbee and others had claimed. The survival of the Jews, in this view, is a result of the flexible tenacity that defines resilience.

Surveys of the sort Myers provides can help identify overarching patterns, tendencies, or structures that were conducive to the resilience of Jewishness. Yet I wonder if they do not go too far in *demystifying* a

phenomenon that tests the limits of our comprehension. To be clear, I am not calling for a return to a providential perspective that would interpret the survival of the Jews as the result of God's will. I am suggesting that there is an *existential* dimension to resilience in Jewish history that eludes any bird's-eye perspective and is even difficult to illuminate at the grass roots.

Since the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C.E., Jews have repeatedly experienced persecutions and catastrophes that completely undermined what they had taken to be the order of things. And repeatedly — even when the verdict of history could easily have been taken to indicate that YHWH had been defeated, or that Christianity or Islam proven victorious, or that God had concealed His face once and for all, or that God was simply dead — a significant number of Jews have chosen to remain Jewish, even when there were off-ramps. Why? Even if we had enough primary materials to explore this question over the *longue durée*, I doubt a purely historical or sociopsychological explanation would suffice.

Twenty-five years ago this fall, when I began my doctoral studies at Columbia, I took my first seminar with my late mentor, the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. The class was ostensibly about 16th-century Jewish historiography; in reality it focused almost exclusively on one book from that period, Solomon ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah* (*Scepter of Judah*). A Spanish Jew and physician, Ibn Verga went into exile, possibly in 1492 as part of the larger exodus of Spanish Jewry. He lived for a time as a *converso* in Lisbon, where he witnessed the 1506 massacre of thousands of fellow "New Christians" suspected of crypto-Judaism. He ultimately settled in Ottoman Turkey, where presumably he reverted to being openly Jewish and wrote the *Shevet Yehudah*.

The book is a loosely and nonchronologically organized account of

64 persecutions of the Jews, interspersed with a few invented dialogues that muse on the question of why Jews are so despised and oppressed.

Without breaking decisively with the traditional interpretation of Jewish suffering as God's punishment for Israel's sins, Ibn Verga was one of the first to suggest that there were also "natural causes" for their maltreatment, from their tendency to haughtiness to their refusal of table fellowship with Christians because of kashrut. This turn to the "natural" was a distant harbinger of the far more thoroughgoing secularization of Jewish history that underpinned the emergence of modern Jewish historiography in the 19th century.

Yerushalmi was fascinated with the *Shevet Yehudah*. He spent years working on an English translation and critical edition of the book that remained unfinished upon his death in 2009. (Happily, Jeremy Cohen, a professor emeritus of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University who published an excellent study of Ibn Verga seven years ago, is completing a critical edition that will include Yerushalmi's translation.) Yerushalmi was one of the premier historians of the complexities of the *converso* experience; he also pioneered the study of the relationship between Jewish history and memory in his most famous book, *Zakhor*. His obsession with Ibn Verga's book obviously was tied to these interests.

My memories of the seminar, however, combined with my later reading of his complete oeuvre, suggest that there was more to it. Near the end of our semester-long reading of the *Shevet Yehudah*, we came upon a passage that appeared to grab Yerushalmi the most. Ibn Verga claims to have heard from elders among the Spanish exiles about a horrific tragedy. A plague had broken out on a ship on which many exiles were traveling. The captain responded by forcing the exiles ashore in a desolate area. Most of them died of starvation, while the remaining few began walking in search of a settlement. Their ranks included one unnamed Jew together with his wife and two sons. In the course of their trek, first his wife died, then he and

the sons he was carrying fainted. When he awoke, he found his sons dead. Utterly bereft, he arose and cried:

> Lord of the universe! Although you are doing much to make me abandon my religion, know for certain that, despite the heavenly hosts, a Jew I am, and a Jew will I remain, and nothing you have brought or will yet bring upon me will help you!

The Job-like story ends with the man burying his sons with "some earth and grass" and embarking once more on his search for an "inhabited place."

Here again, we bump up against the riddle I described above. Why? Why did this particular Jew, after all the cruelty and agony he had endured — culminating in the death of his entire family — resolve to carry on as a Jew? In the story, the man addresses God. He believes that all that has befallen him was ordained by God. But the man seems to have no expectation that God will reward his perseverance. The God who decreed that his wife and two sons must die is not proclaimed here the "true judge," as would be the tradition upon bearing, or even hearing of, such a loss. Why was he determined to survive, and to survive specifically as a Jew?

In a lecture delivered in France in the mid-1980s that was published in an English translation a decade ago in an anthology of his writings, Yerushalmi argued that a yet-to-be-written "history of Jewish hope" might offer a key to understanding Jewish survival. That the man in the *Shevet Yehudah* resumes his quest for an "inhabited place" after burying his sons may suggest he still has some hope, or, at the very least, has not succumbed entirely to hopelessness. Whatever hope he might have, he does not identify it.

The steadfastness of this unnamed Spanish Jewish exile is rooted in a blunt facticity. "A Jew I am, and a Jew I will remain." It is something visceral, instinctive; something that stems not from reason, not even from faith, but from the *kishkes*. It is as though, for this man, to be a Jew is to survive, and there is no survival if not as a Jew. Perhaps it is this core intuition, a preconceptual understanding that lies beyond the reach of explanation or justification, preceding any talk of flexibility and adaptability, and that ultimately cannot be taught, built, or cultivated — "a Jew I am, and a Jew I will remain" — that brings us nearest to the nucleus of resilience in Jewish history. And those of us who carry this embodied spirit are its atoms. ✳