

One Sunday morning before I moved to I moved to Macon, I was on the phone with Marty talking about *shul* business. Somehow the topic of Easter came up and quite innocently I asked her when it was. Her silence was so loud that I knew it was that day. I really had no idea because for the 7 years before moving here, I had lived in a Jewish bubble. I knew that my life would be very different in Macon. I knew I would experience a focus on Christianity that I hadn't since I was a child. But I really didn't get it.

What I didn't get then and certainly do now is how much Christianity affects our day to day living. All aspects of our secular life are focused on and organized by Christianity. Pretty much everything religious happens on Sunday and everything else on Saturday. Exactly the opposite of how our Jewish lives have traditionally been arranged. We Jews are forced to constantly choose between having a full life for ourselves and our children and observing Judaism. It's almost impossible to do both.

Since I've been in Macon, I've met many Christians who are legitimately curious about Judaism and especially about what they see as the Jewish roots of Christianity. I find myself talking a lot about Jewish history, especially from the time of our Temple's destruction in 70 CE to the present.

During that time, we went from an ethnic and religious people who was simply one of many struggling with the power and political structures of the Roman Empire to the most internationally reviled people that ever existed. We have been the subject of virulent anti-semitism from Christians, particularly beginning in 300 CE. How did this happened? How did we become the world's official scapegoat?

It is generally agreed that a Jewish man named Jesus lived and died at the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. To counter a widespread misconception, at no time did Jesus try to create a new religion. He was born, preached and died a Jew. He simply wanted to reform Judaism as did many others at that time.

Both the Romans and the Jews wanted to diminish the power of Jesus who was inciting his followers to political and religious revolt. Both groups saw him as divisive to their power base. That the Jews had something to do with Jesus' death is very possible. The man who actually ordered his death was the Roman governor of Judah, Pontius Pilate.

After his death, the followers of Jesus called themselves Christian Jews. They took Jewish scripture and reinterpreted many verses particularly from our prophets to foretell the coming of Jesus as messiah. The verses that were used were all taken out of context. There is nothing in our scriptures that foretells the coming of Jesus as a messiah.

At first these Christian Jews were persecuted by both Romans and Jews. But by the fourth century, Constantine, the leader of the Roman Empire, converted to Christianity which eventually became the official religion of the Empire. That began official state and religious sponsored anti-semitism. From then until the present Jews have been scapegoated by Christians and blamed for everything that was and could be wrong with our world.

This scapegoating is based on the fact that Christians can't believe we don't see Jesus as divine. They somehow take our rejection of him very personally. For some reason our continuing to practice our religion throughout the centuries is seen as a direct insult to their religion and their God. It has created the intensely

emotionally charged anger that we have experienced for years. To make matters even worse, Christians blamed us for killing Jesus. And even if some Jews of the first century had something to do with his death, certainly, no one alive after that time was responsible. But countless Jews have died after being accused of killing Jesus.

Because Christian hatred of us was purely emotional, it has been impossible for us to successfully fight against it. Both secular and religious leaders over the years have fed that irrational anger leading to the death of millions of Jews.

The reality for us is that if the Christians would stop talking to us about Jesus, we would never think about him at all. I do not say this with any disrespect. But realistically, he is not at all a part of our religion, our scriptures or our thinking.

How have we historically responded to anti-semitism?

Since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE we have been seen as an intellectually strong but physically weak people. We have actually encouraged that belief. The rabbis in the fifth century recreated a *Hanukkah* story [finally written in the Talmud in 500 CE] that excluded the great military victory of a small band of Jews, the *Macabbees*, over the Syrian Greeks in 164 BCE. Rather than telling the truth about that victory, a miracle enough, they wrote instead about a vial of oil which miraculously lasted for eight days instead of only one.

It is easy to understand why the rabbis would create that fiction. After losing two wars to the Romans, one in 70 and the other in 136 CE, they did not want to focus on our ability to wage war and win. They did not want to give the Romans one more reason to persecute us. They believed that as a hunted and hated people, the best way to survive was to keep a low profile.

Throughout the Middle Ages that's just what the Jews did. We kept a low profile; observed the mitzvot the best we could; studied the Torah and Talmud; became experts in the world of commerce; wrote wonderful poetry and Torah interpretations and waited for the political world to change.

We focused not on our ability to fight but on our ability to learn and maintain our traditions and beliefs while the Christians carried out the Crusades and Inquisitions and expelled us from every country in Europe. We truly believed that if people were just more educated, they would stop hating us.

As the Age of Enlightenment dawned, many Jews believed that the world would finally move away from religious and political totalitarianism and see our religion as a viable one. But that's not what happened. We were still singled out for scapegoating and finally we decided to try to blend in.

We began to assimilate, especially in Central and Western Europe. There was a tiny bit of room for us to attend secular universities, work in regular jobs, interact in a more or less equal way with our Christian neighbors. After so many centuries of exclusion and persecution, we had a tiny bit of recognition but only when we gave up part or all of our Jewish beliefs and practices.

And so that's what we did. We were finally allowed to become citizens of the countries we had lived in for centuries. We began to think of ourselves first as German or French or British and only after that as Jews. We thought we had finally arrived.

But that belief was publicly challenged by the Dreyfus Affair in France in 1894 and finally shattered by the rise of Hitler in the 1930s. We realized we were still hated and that our lives were still in danger simply because we were Jews.

After the Shoah, Israel was finally allowed to become a state and we were forced to become the warriors we tried so hard not to be for the previous 2000 years. As could be predicted, that only made matters worse. In fact anti-Zionism has become the new anti-semitism.

And so we move forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, still practicing our own religion and still being reviled because we refuse to practice someone else's.

So how can we continue to live a Jewish life, in as full a way as possible, in a modern and highly assimilated world? Especially how is this possible for us as Jews in Macon?

In some ways we are a very public presence here. We own many businesses in town. In fact, when I first moved here, I was told that without the Jews, the business community would not be as vibrant as it is. We are doctors, lawyers and professionals. We serve on committees for civic, public service and educational organizations. But despite how much we give to our city, there is still a lot of anti-Semitism here. Some of it is overt. Christians tell us that they are praying for us to convert so that we will not go to hell.

But most of it is more covert. Most of it stems from ignorance, from a simple not knowing about our holidays and customs. It's impossible for us not to know about Christian holidays because we are the minority living within the majority. But unfortunately, Christians can live their whole lives without needing to know anything about us. And so unless we are asked for specific dates, civic and school events are planned on our holy days. The anti-semitism caused by our invisibility is the hardest for us to counter in Macon.

It's hard because of how difficult it is to continue practicing our Judaism, to come to synagogue on Shabbat, to have our children take time off from school so that they can celebrate our holidays.

We might ask why it is so important to keep Judaism alive, why we would want to continue when practicing our religion makes it so hard to be part of the larger world.

In the words of British Rabbi Leo Baeck in his 1935 Yom Kippur prayer, 'Who taught the world respect for [humanity], created in the image of God? Who spoke of the Commandments of righteousness, of social justice?...It grew out of our Judaism and it is still growing.'

Rabbi Baeck is absolutely right. We have a powerful and holy tradition and it's up to us and our children to continue building it. We have to find more creative ways to celebrate our holidays. We have to create more meaningful prayer services; to educate our children to want to continue learning and not stop when their Bar or Bat Mitzvah is over. We and our children need to understand and feel the importance of what we Jews gave to the world and what we continue to give. We also have to learn about our religion so that we can teach our neighbors about it, so that we can put an end to some of the ignorance.

May this year be one where we solidify our Jewish community and take on the responsibility to learn and practice even more than we do now.

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*Shana tova u'mitukah.* May we all have a good and sweet year.