

The 9th of Av, in Modern Terms

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The 9th of Av is a date on the Jewish calendar which is marked as a day of mourning. Jews fast for 25 hours on this day, including refraining from the nourishment of water. The observance of this day brings overwhelming sadness to the faithful and fear for the future.

Originally, the 9th of Av was to commemorate the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem by ancient foes who believed that by destroying bricks and mortar, they would also decimate the faith in one G-d. The blood of the Jews spilled in the Holy Land over the millennia did not stamp out the belief in monotheism. In fact, the Jewish faith gave birth to both Christians and Muslims.

Of the many massacres of the Jews which have taken place, probably none can equal the decimation caused by the Roman Empire around the time Christianity began and the German Reich during World War II. Even this is not the entirety of what we remember on the 9th of Av. The Kinot, Words of Remembrance, remind us that robust, holy Jewish communities in England, France, The Rhineland and Spain were destroyed beginning with the First Crusades in the 11th Century. So many Jews were killed, that is surprising for the religion to have survived at all.

One cannot help but wonder why anyone determined to remain Jewish, given the war against the faith that has been waged by the Western world. The Jews did have some respite from their enemies in India and China, but even in China, the great city of Kaifeng the Jews were set upon by Jesuit missionaries.

During World War II, oddly enough, some Jews were given assistance who were able to flee to Hong Kong.

I must admit to feeling a certain amount of anger on this day; anger for how others have treated Jews, the hypocrisy of those who cry out for justice on behalf of other peoples, and the continuing dilemma faced by the Jewish community. We have tried assimilation, and that did not work. The Jewish community has tried observance, and while that kept us Jewish, it did not save us from the rampage of those with minds that hate.

Neither left wing nor right wing have saved the Jews. My mother's family was murdered by the Germans in World War II, a few escaped and fought for the Red Army and were subsequently sent to Siberia. Politics and politicians offered no refuge to a Jewish community under attack from blind racism and bigotry.

As one who grew up hearing stories about burning cities in the late '60s, protests, riots and anti-Vietnam sentiment, a natural affinity for the African-American civil rights movement evolved. We marched with Martin Luther King, a committed Zionist himself, and supported our African American brothers and sisters in arms.

However, it has always been a disturbing trend among some in the African-American movement to fall into the same bigotry that white people have. In the 1930s and '40s, black riots in Harlem drove out the Jews. My father's family was among those of the Jewish community who fled north to Washington Heights for safety. During the riots of the '60s and today, there were always fringe elements in the African-American community which adopted the twisted ideology of their own right-wing detractors: "All your problems are the fault of the Jews, who are evil devils."

Fortunately, there are those in the African-American community who vociferously speak up against blatant anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, they are not enough and they have not squelched the voices of people like so-called Minister Farrakhan and his elite band of anti-Semites. The Jewish and African-American communities in this country could be a powerful alliance to help achieve equality for all in this country, but not if those in the Jewish community and Israel are maliciously and falsely accused.

Only recently, I saw some absolute garbage, for example, attacking the Zionist Organization of America and Morton Klein as agents of Mossad. As a former member of the National Board and sometimes legal counsel to ZOA, I know that nothing could be further from the truth. Attacks upon Israel are a slander perpetrated by those who repeat the racist mantra of past generations.

It is time for all of us to stamp out racism in our communities, and to work together as one people. The 9th of Av should be a national day for all of us to mourn the price of hate. For Jews, adherence and observance of our traditional faith are crucial if we are going to contribute in a meaningful way to the eradication of xenophobia in the psyche of our fellow citizens.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.