

The Blessing of Being the Minority

“In the early 1900s, an old Jew is traveling alone in his compartment on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The train stops and an officer in the czar’s army gets on. He and the Jew travel for a while in silence. Suddenly the officer grabs the Jew by the lapels and demands: “Tell me, why are you Jews so much brighter than everyone else?” The Jew is silent a moment, then responds: “It’s because of the herring we eat.” The officer quiets down and the trip resumes. Soon the Jew takes out a piece of herring and starts to eat it. The officer asks him: “How many more pieces of herring do you have?” “A dozen,” the Jew replies. “How much do you want for them?” “Twenty rubles,” a big sum of money. The officer takes out the money and gives it to the Jew. The old man gives him the herring and the officer takes a bite. Suddenly he stops. “This is ridiculous,” he says. “In Moscow I could have bought all this herring for a few pennies.”

“You see,” says the Jew, “it’s working already.””

Herring is not the secret to Jewish success. I don't even know a single Jew my age who likes herring. I know I'm not supposed to talk about food today, but something tells me that thinking about herring isn't going to peek your appetite.

The herring story does, though, beg the age-old question: What is the key that has led to Jewish success throughout the ages. Why is it that American Jews are twice as likely as non-Jews to attend college? Why are Jews also massively overrepresented in the fields of medicine, law, and science?

Jews are such a significant part of the music industry that violinist, Isaac Stern, described the American-Russian cultural exchange as follows: "They send us their Jews from Odessa and we send them our Jews from Odessa." Why is it that we comprise less than one third of 1 percent of the world's population, yet received 22 percent of the Nobel prizes... perhaps a hair less, as none of the recipients announced yesterday are Jewish.

We've already established that it's not the herring. I believe that the theories of genetic intellectual superiority have been sufficiently debunked, surely the focus on Jewish education has played a significant role in the flourishing of Jews, but that's only a small part of the equation.

I find the most compelling answer comes from Rabbi Leo Baeck, the rabbi who headed the German-Jewish community in Germany during the Nazi era, until he was deported to Theresienstadt in 1943. In his book, *The Essence of Judaism*, Baeck reflects on why Jews and Judaism have flourished for thousands of years. I highlighted this section in his book over a decade ago, placed a sticky note on this remark, and I've been thinking about it ever since.

“A minority is compelled to think; that is the blessing of its fate. It must always persist in a mental struggle for that consciousness of truth which success and power comfortingly assure to rulers and their supporting multitudes. The conviction of the many is based on the weight of possession; the conviction of the few is expressed through the energy of constant searching and finding.”

Baeck goes on to write that: [The Jewish people's] very existence throughout the ages is proof that conviction cannot be mastered by numberers.

To sum up what Baeck is saying, the blessing of being a minority, is that we are always forced to think.

Baeck wrote these words while living as a Jewish minority in Germany, but they ring true today, and throughout our history. Living in the Diaspora, we are always the few, and we have always been the outspoken.

Growing up as a student in the public school system of Yonkers, NY, I was one of the few Jews. My class was a diverse student body of African American students, Hispanic, Asian, some White students, but Jews, we were few and far between.

When it came time for Chanukah, the teachers weren't so great at explaining what it was, so they turned to me. When there was a question about Judaism, people turned to me. Because there wasn't really anyone else who was Jewish to turn to.

As much as I deride my parents for sending me to a public school where I wasn't around other Jewish kids, in the end, perhaps it was a blessing. I couldn't help but have a Jewish identity when I was the other. And I chose to embrace it as a blessing, and not abandon it to fit in with the other non-Jewish students in my class. My Jewish sense of self was sharpened by being the minority, and by being the other.

I found a similar experience when I was the Student Rabbi in Beckley, West Virginia. There aren't too many Jews there in case you didn't know. The community at Temple Beth El has about only 30 families, and they are aging. Yet, they are passionately Jewish, because if they aren't, no one else will be. They are the only synagogue in a 50 mile radius. They fight year after year to keep their community alive, because the Bible-belt around them reminds them that they are different. Much of the West Virginia community sees them as the token Jews, but often they feel like other, and for them, that's a blessing.

Being the minority is a blessing, and that is why one of the unsung heroes of the Jewish tradition might just be a man named Rabbi Shamai.

You may have heard of his colleague, Rabbi Hillel. In the ancient times of the first century of the common era, Hillel and Shammai would constantly argue of Jewish law. The Talmud records over 300 disputes between their two schools of thought, in only three cases are the opinions of Shammai favored by the rabbis over Hillel. That's 99 percent of the time that Shammai is in the minority, yet his views are always recorded, and he never concedes his position. Hillel's views have become more related to how to live Jewishly, but Shammai's character seems more in step with what it means to be Jewish. That is, to be in the minority, to nonetheless voice our opinions, to not buckle to the voices around us. The Jewish voice might be most often the outspoken minority, but it carries with it the power to effect novel thinking and change.

Malcom Gladwell points out another blessing to being a minority, in particular, being a persecuted minority, which I think might well apply to the Jewish people. In his book, *David and Goliath*, he labels the blessing with the term "desirable difficulty," in which he concludes that

not all difficulties give way to negative outcomes.¹ Adversity may in some cases cause trauma, yet it often proves to be the crucible for courage, strength, resolve, and deeper thinking.

Yes, feeling like the “other” can be lonely; It can feel like we don’t have a sense of belonging; it can make us feel estranged from the world around us. But being the minority might just be our “desired difficulty,” it might just be the blessing that drives our success.

To borrow a term from the British historian, Arnold Toynbee, the Jews are what he labels a “creative minority.” When a civilization is provoked by challenge or in civilizational decline, a minority group innovates a solution. This creative minority brings systematic change and influence to the larger group. Civilizations eventually die, according to Toynbee, and most other historians. The Jews, we might think, are the obvious exception. We have survived through the collapse of the Mesopotamian Roman, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Egyptian, civilizations. We have witnessed the falls of monarchies, the falls of

¹ Gladwell, Malcom, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (2013).

dictators, and the falls of empires. We are still here. The Jews have been the creative minority that has brought ideas and innovations that have enabled civilizations to thrive throughout the ages, and even when civilizations collapse, we endure.

I'm reminded of the prophet Jeremiah, who wrote to the Jews who were exiled to Babylonia in the year 586 BCE, just after the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. We might expect Jeremiah to prophesy of the eventual return to Jerusalem and rebuilding of the Temple, but he does something else. He offers that living as a minority in Babylonia might just be a blessing:

בְּנוּ בָתִּים וְשִׁבוּ וְנִטְעוּ גִּנּוֹת וְאָכְלוּ אֶת-פְּרִיָן:

קְחוּ נָשִׁים וְהוֹלִידוּ בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וּקְחוּ לְבָנֵיכֶם נָשִׁים וְאֶת-בָּנוֹתֵיכֶם תְּנוּ לְאִנְשֵׁים וְתִלְדְּנָה בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וּרְבוּ-שָׁם וְאַל-תִּמְעָטוּ:

וְדַרְשׁוּ אֶת-שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ בְעַדָּהּ אֵל-יְהוָה כִּי בְשְׁלוֹמָהּ יִהְיֶה לְכֶם שְׁלוֹם:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give

your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and

daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the

peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.

Pray to your God, because if Babylonia prospers, you too will prosper.

(Jer. 29:5–7)

Jeremiah reminds us that not only can the Jewish people survive outside their homeland, but they can maintain Judaism in a far away land. At the same time, living amidst the larger world will be a blessing not just for you, but a blessing for their society. Jeremiah seems to be introducing the world to Toynbee's idea of the creative minority.

Yet if being a minority were the simple key to success, everyone would love facing adversity... they don't. And the trials of life aren't always desirable difficulties. There is trauma that we face in being Jewish, and the scars are lasting and sometimes debilitating. Being a minority might just be the herring, or it could be a red herring in the search to explain Jewish success.

The caveat to the blessing of being a minority, is that the blessing depends on us maintaining a positive view of what it means to be Jewish. When we view Jewishness as a burden, something that we want

to hide, or even just an afterthought, we squander our blessing, and instead choose to see it as a curse.

The Torah portion this morning famously lays out that we have a choice to see what's before us as either a blessing OR a curse.

נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְלָלָה

I have set before you a blessing, and a curse (Deuteronomy 29)

Choose Blessing! We all know friends and family who have shed their sense of Jewishness to assimilate into the contemporary world. The weight of being Jewish is heavy, it's burdensome, and who would want to choose this for themselves?

We remind those who are converting to Judaism, that the choice to be Jewish comes with the baggage of persecution, of feeling “othered,” and of being the minority. Ultimately, however, these are part of the inheritance of blessing that comes along with being Jewish. The minority is always forced to think, and when we see it as a blessing, we

see ourselves as the creative minority, and enter the process of constantly searching, inventing, and innovating. It's a blessing only and if we choose to embrace and maintain a positive view of our Jewish identity.

As Jews living outside the land of Israel, we face the struggle of forging the strong links to the world around us, while at the same time preserving and nurturing our Jewish identity. The Jews have lived in a state of Diaspora for 2600 years, and we are still here today. In the face of assimilation, we have become the creative minority. We have faced persecution and annihilation, and we have grown resilient and acquired grit. And when living as the minority, we have strengthened our Jewish identity, our faith in God, and the communities to which we belong.

What's the secret to our success? It's not the herring. We have been blessed with being the creative minority throughout the world, and with this blessing, we have the responsibility to think, we have the charge to nature our Jewish senses of self, and we have the wherewithal to face hardships of being the other. Let this be our blessing, and let this lead to our successes in the year to come.

G'mar Chatima tovah