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A Legacy of Survival:
Perseverance has consistently
saved Jews from persecution

Jews often wonder why they are almost universally hated. Indeed, in a number of universities this question has become the theme for academic study and expensive research projects. And just as the investigations multiply, so do the organizations seeking to put an end to the cancer.

I prefer research on another question: Why did so many Jews remain Jews despite persecution, crusades, pogroms and, finally, the Holocaust? And why are so many Israelis calm despite the virtual lynching that Washington has orchestrated for them as all the Arab countries join with the PLO in the hope that they can precipitate another holocaust?

It is important that we rejoice in the fact that our loyalty to peoplehood and tradition is as deep as it is. Of course, there have been losses along the way: Apostasy, assimilation and even suicides. As there will continue to be falloff, what must we do to increase and assist those who wish to remain committed to Judaism?

Most Jewish universities are secularist in their commitment, and since they know the answer to be one that favors religion, they would rather ignore it. But that answer is the answer no matter how hard we try to close our eyes to it.

For millennia, Jews were loyal to Judaism because it was their faith. Sometimes the simpler the Jew's faith, the less intellectual he was, the more likely he was not to yield to the oppressor. If his vision of the hereafter was clear, if he firmly believed in its existence, he might even martyr himself when the challenge arose.

Other Jews did not want to assimilate and thus be a constituent of the Jew-hating world. They saw the hereafter in their offspring and did not want their descendants to be in the ranks of those trying to put an end to Jewish existence.

There were those who simply loved being Jewish, wanting to bequeath that love to future generations in the hope that those generations might also experience that which was loved, that they might benefit for having been blessed by the Jewish life.

Some stayed Jewish in the spirit of resistance, choosing to be heroic by saying to the anti-Semite that he will not be permitted to win. Many of us enjoy defying the villain.

Of considerable importance to our survival is an article of faith, rooted in Judaism but not exclusively religious: The belief that there will always be Jews and Judaism. No matter how hard the anti-Semite might try he will not win. The prophet Isaiah said it thousands of years ago: "No instrument used to destroy you will avail." (*Isaiah* 54:17) Many have tried but we remain an eternal people.

Why is this doctrine so powerful? Simply because it makes for a form of this-worldly immortality. It allows Jews to feel that they belong to a people that can't be knocked out, allowing us a vicarious immortality. The bearing of children is the most natural fulfillment of this; so many Jewish traditions have blossomed with regard to memorial prayers and services by children. These traditions provide continuity without terminus.

In Germany with the U.S. military after World War II, I heard some unforgettable testimony to our belief that we are indeed an eternal people.

One victim of the Holocaust was certain that he would perish, as would Jewish civilization, but that a Jew somewhere might survive. Fearing that the Nazis would destroy the Hebrew prayerbook, he hand-copied the prayerbook from beginning to end. It was passed on from victim to survivor until the war ended, when it was placed in one of the Holocaust museums for all to see.

At least one great talmudist and philosopher - who also did not survive - continued to write books throughout his ordeal. His manuscripts written in the concentration camps miraculously found their way to Rabbi M.M. Kasher, who under the auspices of Yeshiva University published a number of volumes of extraordinary value to experts in both Jewish law and Jewish philosophy.

Perhaps the most convincing testimony to our inherent spiritual optimism is the determination of so many Holocaust survivors

to have large families. “Survivors have a higher birthrate than American Jews,” wrote William Helmreich of CUNY’s Graduate Center, “one of the clearest signs that survivors believe in the future, namely that they choose to bring children into a world that was once so cruel to them.”

Jews have persistently displayed a drive not only to be identified with an eternal people but to experience the gratification that comes from making us eternal.

I am only suggesting a number of answers to my question, answers derived from personal experience. Perhaps scholarly research might help one to do better. Nevertheless, the cumulative impact of all these answers reassures me that there will always be Jews and Judaism.

God Himself has promised no less.