

Yizkor: Are We Progressing or Regressing?

Is the world getting better or worse? Were Jews once better off? What is the correct way to view the current state of the Jewish people?

The World State

Are we progressing, or regressing? Is the world getting better or worse?

Let's start with the bad news. Everybody is worried about climate change, which seems to be resulting in massive weather events. The assumption is that we, through our consumption, are destroying G-d's wondrous creation.

In addition, there is Russia, China, and the ever-present threat of the nuclear war, and yet another part of the gloomy picture is the sluggish stock market.

We Jews also have our own personal problems. Iran always threatening to destroy the State of Israel, Anti-Semitism on the rise, and the ever present tension between Israel and the Palestinians. The bottom line —things are getting worse and worse.

In contrast, there are those who claim that things have gotten

better and better and are still going in that direction. Medicine hasn't seen such advances in the past as we've seen in recent decades. Thousands of lives are saved daily. Twenty years ago these same people would have never made it. Material comforts and quality of life have remarkably improved. People have never lived as well as they do today.

These two approaches also appear in Judaism.

Jewish Decline

On the one hand, when we look at Jewish history, we don't feel so good. At first we received the Torah on Mt. Sinai and heard G-d speak. We had Moshe Rabeinu, the greatest prophet the Jews ever had. He taught us the Torah. We were in the desert eating the manna while at the same time the Heavenly clouds were protecting us. Life was pretty good.

Afterwards we entered the Land of Israel without Moses, and things were not the same. But things were still okay. The entire Jewish nation was on its home soil, we had the First Temple and things were going well.

But at one point everything started going downhill. Jews started worshipping idols and the security situation worsened. In the end there was a war and we lost ten of our twelve tribes. The Temple was destroyed and the Jewish nation was banished from its land.

When the second Temple was built, things were not the same. From the onset of the second Temple, prophecy had ceased. And after 420 years, the second Temple was destroyed. From

then on, there was a “progressive spiritual descent over time.” As time went on, we moved away further and further from that momentous event at Mt. Sinai, further away from our starting point when we were given the Torah. The Jewish nation’s spiritual standing has been declining ever since.

The Chassidic Approach

But my friends, I have some good news for you. Judaism believes that anything and everything that comes from G-d is for the good. Therefore, whatever happens in the world or in Judaism is not viewed as regressing or getting worse, but rather is becoming better, even if it doesn’t seem that way.

We have the custom to light an additional candle for each additional day of Chanukah. This illustrates the Jewish point of view towards life. One must always progress and not remain stagnant. The same would apply in any area of Judaism.

We don’t do less. On the contrary, we do more and more.

Let’s take Yom Kippur as an example. Over 2,500 years ago, the only thing we did on Yom Kippur was fast. All the other things we do on this day were performed by the High Priest. He confessed and prayed on everyone’s behalf. After the destruction of the Temple, the Sages instituted a few brief prayers, such as “Al Chet”, because the High Priest no longer did this. The Jews at the time also uttered brief sections of the “Amida”, and that’s it.

In the times of the Talmud, the Jews would be in synagogue for only a half an hour. In a later generation, an additional prayer

was added, and from generation to generation additional prayers were added. In one generation people became aware that the “Avinu Malkeinu” prayer was most effective and it was added to the Yom Kippur prayers. In a later generation some “slichot” were added until we ended up with a thick machzor replete with prayers and “slichot” that we all know. One thing is for sure. We are becoming more and more jam-packed with mitzvos.

Around five hundred years ago it was permitted to eat rice on Pesach. A few Sages came along and made us more “religious” and forbade us to eat rice on Pesach. More than a thousand years ago it was permitted to marry more than one woman. Rabeinu Gershom, the “Great Light of the Diaspora,” raised us up to a higher spiritual level and today, we can only marry one wife. Varied traditions and customs were added as time went on.

Jews By Choice

Bearing in mind the above intellectual discussion, there’s only one problem. We shouldn’t forget that 500 years ago, 90% of the Jewish nation was observant. Ten percent wasn’t. Today only 10% are observant and 90% are born to non-observant parents. Where in the world is the typical “progress” that Judaism believes takes place over time? How does the doctrine of “rising in holiness” compute with the somber reality?

A few years ago, a Chabad emissary in Odessa in the Ukraine brought over a mohel from Israel who would perform the circumcision ceremony on young and old alike who never had the opportunity to be circumcised. A long line formed for those

who wanted. A newspaper reporter came and interviewed people in line.

One of those standing was a man in his sixties. The reporter turned to him and said, "You are certainly a religious man. It appears that this rite is so important to you, even in your advanced age." The elderly man said, "I am an atheist." The surprised reporter then said, "If that's the case, why do you want to have a Bris?"

"What do you mean? I'm Jewish."

Once I met a Jew that came to synagogue on Yom Kippur. I asked him if he came because he's becoming more observant and came to the realization how great the day of Yom Kippur is.

His response was, "No. I don't believe in Yom Kippur."

I then asked him, "Nu, then what are you doing here?"

He answered, "I'm here because I'm Jewish. Yom Kippur is a day for a Jew to be in synagogue."

We are witness to a phenomenon in this generation never experienced in the history of the Jewish nation. Jews born to Jewish parents who are far removed from mainstream Judaism choose on their own accord to do mitzvos.

This was unheard of in Jewish history. Throughout the generations, Jews were observant because they were born into it, being nurtured from the home. They grew up in the "shtetel," the Jewish village, and continued being observant as they understood. Even in Russia where Judaism was abolished by the

government, there was the non-Jew who reminded the Jew in his way that he was Jewish. A child beaten in school already knew that he was Jewish. He wasn't accepted to the university because he was Jewish. And there are other such examples.

However, in our generation, no one screams at or hits or reminds you that you are Jewish, and still people of their own free will choose to be observant. A mitzvah that a secular Jew performs of his own free will is cherished more in the eyes of G-d than the many mitzvos performed by a Jew who does it out of habit.

Not only are we not regressing, we are progressing.

We are headed in the direction of the Messianic Era, a time when all of us will observe the Torah and its commandments of our own free will.