

“bad,” but rather to emphasize the need to study our collective history: to study it, not whitewash or demonize it. Those Christian critics who think that the George Floyd protests mark a threat to or even the end of Western or Christian civilization should honestly reexamine their position: are you truly looking at an end, or are you looking in the mirror? The Christian East is so deeply engulfed in the hypocrisy and bloodshed of old that our experience—spiritual and

shameless, holy and hypocritical, beautiful and disgraceful—allows us to reflect on the current situation and share our experience. Such reflection undoubtedly should be at the core of our social mission and witness today, a witness only possible through intellectual resistance to excesses from the right and the left, through introspection, through attention to context and detail, through a refusal to demonize the opponent, and through collective metanoia. ✱



Sergei P. Brun is a Russian historian specializing in the history of the Latin East and the Church of Antioch. He is the author of several articles, papers, translations, as well as the two-volume monograph *The Byzantines and the Franks in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia* (Moscow, 2015). Currently he is a staff member at St. Thomas Institute in Moscow and a member of the editorial board of *The Historic Reporter*.

REFLECTIONS

In Laughter and Tears

Harry Wootner

Nearly all Jewish holidays can be summed up in one sentence: They tried to kill us; they failed; let's eat.

The history of the Jewish people—the religion, the race, the ethnicity, the culture—is, not to put too fine a point on it, written in blood. From a possibly mythical pharaoh thinking that the children of Israel were getting too numerous and turning them into slaves to the terrifyingly real anti-Semitism cropping up in France today, the history of the Jews has been one long story of persecution, forced conversion, and genocide, with a few

breaks for shepherding thrown in for variety. We've been blamed for everything from the Black Death to the fall of Wall Street; in dozens of nations we've been unwelcome, chased out, or killed. Some of the worst atrocities in human history have been enacted upon us, and whether we like it or not, this awareness of danger and persecution is so pervasive that it has become a central part of our identity.

Therefore, it will not surprise you to hear of Tisha B'Av, which is a commemorative day of mourning in the height of summer. We fast, sit on

the floor, and listen to Lamentations chanted in a haunting tune, remembering the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem and so many other tragedies and travesties that have befallen us. One of the most powerful experiences of my life was in the summer of 2002, sitting in a darkened room on the floor, listening to someone chant the last phone calls from the people in the Twin Towers to the same tune as Lamentations. I was hungry, tired and heartsick at the shattered broken pieces our world had become. I would not be at all surprised if someone collects last words from the victims of the coronavirus plague and sets them to the same tune. We have a structure in place to help us cope with communal grief, and as painful as it is to sit through, it is that very pain that allows us to stand up afterwards and keep living.

The part that might surprise you is a different holiday: Purim. Purim is the celebration of the story of the Book of Esther, which can once again be summarized as: they tried to kill us; they failed. The king of Shushan allows his advisor to pick a day to kill all the Jews, not knowing that his wife, Queen Esther, is Jewish. At great personal risk, she reveals her religion. The king decides that the Jews will be allowed to fight back on the appointed day, thus making it a massacre in the other direction, and the advisor and all his sons get executed gruesomely. Great, let's have cookies.

First, I should mention that Jews consider this story a fairy tale. That's important, because we truly celebrate it: we dress up in costumes, do silly plays, run carnivals, and give and eat lots of sweets. And why must it be a fairy tale for us to celebrate it? It would make sense for us to take it more seriously if we thought it was

real—after all, state-sanctioned all-out genocide is a weird thing to remember by throwing water balloons at the rabbi in the dunking tank and giving children noisemakers to drown out the name of the villain. But the reason it matters that it's a fairy tale is because the villain, Haman, dies at the end, and we're allowed to be happy about it. On Passover, when we read about the Ten Plagues in Egypt, we take wine from our own cups—decreasing our own joy—and spill it in memory of the Egyptians who suffered, even thousands of years later, even though they were the ones who chased us through the parted sea, determined to bring us back and kill or enslave us again. On Hanukkah, we celebrate the rededication of the Temple, but we do not tell glorious stories of the Maccabees slaughtering the other army, only of them securing and sanctifying our most holy place. We recognize the humanity in every other person. Even our enemies are people and must be respected and, when defeated, mourned.

But Haman gets executed and we throw a party. Because he wasn't real. Esther wasn't real. It's a parable about courage and faith overcoming power and greed, a Cinderella story for ancient Persia. We get to laugh about this story—which is so much like so many other, real, devastating stories—because it didn't really happen. I saw it perfectly described on Facebook a while back as "Purim: Genocide Remembrance Day #1." Funny. Whimsical.

There is so much suffering in the world, not only right now but always. And we, as a people, have always been painfully aware of it. How can we keep our faith when that very faith is what has led to so much bloodshed and misery? How



Maurycy Gottlieb,
*Jews Praying in the
Synagogue on Yom
Kippur*, 1878. Tel
Aviv Museum of Art.

can we believe in a God who allows the Holocaust?

There's an old saying: two Jews, three opinions. I have two answers for this question, but if you ask someone else, you're probably going to get another answer or three from them. I speak only for myself, but I speak from a lifetime of study, learning, questioning, and belief.

The first answer is this: life is too important to take seriously. For every day of mourning, there must be a day of celebrating. For every tear that is shed, a song must be sung. Laughter is heard farther than weeping. Those who sow in sorrow will reap in joy. In ghettos and concentration camps, in quarantines and prisons, in slave quarters and hidden rooms, we laugh, because it is everything. It is

everything. Gallows humor, far from being inappropriate, is the most important kind of humor in the world. We have learned, as a people, that whoever or whatever is the villain of the moment can take a lot away from you. They can take your safety, your health, your home, your property, your family, even your very life. But they cannot take your faith, if you're in a faithful kind of mood, and they cannot take your sense of humor.

It is easy to be funny in easy times, to make jokes while drinking and playing party games, while vacationing in a tropical paradise, while life is predictable and comfortable. It's easy, but it's not as important as when the jokes are harder: during a eulogy, in a hospital room, in quarantine and isolation, when you're crying about the things that were supposed to be and aren't, the life you were supposed to have and can't. It is the very things in life that are the most deadly and serious that must, above all others, give us the sense of the absurd, of the humor in everything.

This is all a way of saying that suffering makes us human, but so does our response to it. That it's the weeping in the night that leads to the joy in the morning—you can't have one without the other, in either direction. We are dynamic and multi-dimensional, and thinking that we could exist in a world that is less than that is foolish—but that doesn't mean we have to be depressed about it all the time.

The second answer is a little more complicated, but possibly a better answer.

I foster kittens for my local shelter, and as I type this, I have two of my current babies, Jacko and his sister Lantern, curled up in my lap, tired

from a long day's work of playing and sleeping and nursing. They have no idea what I'm doing. Even being vaguely aware of me as a presence, as another life form, as something other than just a source of warmth and food who sometimes clips their nails, they have absolutely no way to understand why my fingers are on these keys. They don't speak English and I don't speak Kitten, but even if we could find a way to communicate, they would still have no way even to form a concept of what I'm doing—creating words to give to someone to put into a publication about God and Judaism and suffering. I'd have to start with the concept of abstract thought and symbolic language, and that's just to get them to understand what writing is. Forget about laptops, keyboards, religion, or God.

They're pretty sure they have a solid understanding of suffering; sometimes I put them into a little bowl on a scale to make sure they're gaining weight, removing them from each other and their mom for *ten whole seconds*. Even longer if they wiggle. We think about our animals' not understanding things like medicine, vaccinations, and pain, but what about why we have to leave them to go to work? It's not like my five-week-old kittens—any more than their street-wise mother—have a basic grasp of a capitalistic society or exchanging money for goods and services. And though, from their perspective, my leaving them behind each day—or weighing them, or giving them shots—is inflicting needless suffering on them, it's not just that they don't understand why it is needed; they couldn't *possibly* understand.

In terms of levels of sentience, I dwell on a different plane, separated by several orders of magnitude from

my beloved, dopey kittens. And I do love them. I spend endless hours with them. I adore discovering their unique personalities. I clean up after them with no particular disgust—most of the time—and don't mind the scratches they can't help inflicting with their non-retractable claws. When I cannot save them, when they don't thrive and I can't, through sheer force of will, make them absorb enough nutrients to survive, I weep bitter tears for every single one of them. Just because I am in a different order of life doesn't mean that they aren't precious to me, nor that I don't genuinely care for them; it doesn't mean that I don't mourn them when I lose them, or that their pain is not my pain.

We Jews take a certain amount of sideways pride in knowing that we know almost nothing about God. But I can say this much: anyone who could design the universe has got to be on a different, higher plane of sentience than we are. So the answer I have as to why God would allow the holocaust, Covid-19, or any other tremendous suffering, has to be not only that I do not know, but that I probably can't even understand the most basic required concepts in order to know. Maybe Covid is to us as vaccines are

to my kittens. Maybe Covid is to us as failure to thrive is to my kittens. Maybe even my ability to understand analogies is not great enough to see the parallels between my relationship with Jacko and Lantern and God's relationship with us. But oddly, I take comfort in the parallels that I can see. This is not to affirm insight into any plan that God might have for us and our suffering; but rather that whatever happens is beyond my ability to conceptualize—even the smallest, most basic component. From here, sitting with my kittens in quarantine, with a migraine, lonely and scared, in pain and hungry, I have no idea what's going on or what's coming next. But if I could find a tall enough mountain, if I could climb up the ladder of enlightenment onto a higher plane of existence, if I could only get close enough or far enough away, then everything would make sense. Just because I can't understand it doesn't mean it isn't there. To quote an anonymous prisoner of a concentration camp, "I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when I cannot feel it. I believe in God, even when [God] is silent."

I believe there is an answer, even if it's one that I can never know. ✱



Halleluyah "Harry" Wootner is the lay leader of a small Jewish community in Colorado. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Denver and has studied Torah and Talmud under the direction of Rabbi Sandy Cohen for over a decade.