

The Jewish People's Miraculous Key to Survival Throughout the Ages

I am living the Jewish dream. For nearly 2,000 years, since the destruction of the holy temple in Jerusalem and the expulsion of the Jewish people from Israel, my people have prayed and hoped for one thing, "to be a free people in our own land" ("Hatikvah," Israel's national anthem).

In 2005, my husband and I decided to realize that dream of returning to Israel and living in the Holy Land. Today, I am blessed to raise my family in our biblical homeland.

But I grew up living the American dream. I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, where I enjoyed the freedom and opportunities that this great country provided for my family. My parents sent me to an outstanding Jewish school, where I received an excellent education, and our family was part of an active and vibrant Jewish community.

We spent our weekends at the synagogue, and our lives revolved around the Jewish calendar and life cycle events. We lit our Sabbath candles every Friday, we built our *sukkah* in the backyard during Sukkot, we gathered with family and friends around the seder table to celebrate Passover. My childhood is filled with the memories of these *moadim*, "appointed times," where the stories of our faith were shared, and the fundamental values of Judaism were reinforced and celebrated.

It was only when I was older that I understood that Jewish life had not always been that way. In fact, life for the Jewish people has rarely been as wonderful and comfortable and free over the course of the last two millennia. Rather, Jewish history has been a long and arduous journey that began in the promised land and continued through two exiles, to the "four

quarters of the earth" (Isa. 11:12b, NIV), leaving a trail of persecution, destruction and terror.

On my mother's side, my family is descended from survivors of the Holocaust, the darkest chapter in history during which one-third of the world's Jewish population was systematically killed at the hands of the Nazis. On my father's side, I come from 10 generations who clung to the land of Israel, miraculously surviving wars and famines, until they could no longer hold on and fled to the U.S. in 1928.

Both my parents grew up in a generation that assimilated into the mainstream culture and abandoned their Jewish identity at an alarming rate. In my own generation, more than half of American Jews have left their faith and married outside of the Jewish community.

When I look back on the history of my people, and even my own family, I cannot help but wonder. How did we, as a people, survive? How is it possible that we lived through such physical hardship and yet maintained our spiritual connection when the odds were against us? How did my parents maintain their faith when it would have been so much easier to blend in with everyone else?

One answer, of course, is that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has always protected and guarded the apple of His eye, Israel. The other answer can be found in the steadfast commitment in Judaism to pass down our faith to the next generation, what has come to be known as *l'dor v'dor*, דור לדור, "from generation to generation."

This responsibility to pass on the faith from one generation to the next is embedded into the very DNA of the nation of Israel. On the eve of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, Moses had but one recurring message for the people of Israel: Teach your children—share your story, tell them about God's greatness, your faith and God's miracles, as we find in

Chapters 12 and 13 of the book of Exodus.

Similarly, as the nation of Israel stood on the banks of the Jordan River, poised to finally enter the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God gave them the quintessential declaration of faith and directed them to teach it to their children. Once again, at a critical juncture in history, there was an emphasis on educating the next generation.

This commitment to educating the next generation and passing on our faith has been key to the survival of the Jewish people throughout the ages. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, once wrote, "Having children is more than a gift. It's a responsibility. For us as Jews, it's the most sacred responsibility there is. On it depends the future of the Jewish people. For 4,000 years our people survived because, in every generation, Jews made it their highest priority to hand their faith on to their children."

Ultimately, passing on the faith has remained, and is still primarily accomplished through the home and family life. The main way Jewish mothers and fathers transmit Jewish values and ideas is through the biblically mandated holy days God commanded the Israelites to observe.

These observances and rituals have bonded Jewish families and communities and kept their faith alive through exiles, dispersions, inquisitions, pogroms, persecution and yes, even the Holocaust.

And I'm confident that passing on the faith will be critical for whatever obstacles we face next. {eo}

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This article is an excerpt from Yael Eckstein's upcoming book,
Generation to Generation.