

There were days in the past where we have experienced painful and angry confrontation between Jews and Blacks. Doubly painful was not only the argument but the terms in which the argument was being conducted. Both sides, Jews and Blacks alike, were trying to score debaters points by arguing over which side had suffered more. Jews were saying, "Granted, slavery was terrible. Granted, people were whipped, humiliated; families were separated. But, how could you compare it to Auschwitz? There were no gas chambers on the plantations. There were no sadistic scientific experiments, babies being tortured in the presence of their mothers. There were no killing squads making hundreds of people dig their own graves and then killing them. How can you compare slavery at its worst to that?" And, Blacks used to answer in those days: "Don't talk to us about how you can sympathize with us, because you have suffered, too; the Holocaust lasted six years; slavery lasted six generations. And, how can you compare discrimination in white-collar employment and country club membership to what young black men have to go through every day of their lives at the hands of the police? Jews complained about being mugged by black drug addicts and blacks complained about being robbed by Jewish storekeepers and employers.

It was all so sad and it was all so futile, part of what Robert Hughes called the "culture of complaint," the assumption that an individual or group has claim on other people's sympathy because they have suffered, and the more you have suffered, the more urgent and legitimate your claim.

It was sad and it was futile, in part, because both sides were right and both were wrong. Slavery was a two-century long violation of human dignity from which American Blacks have still not entirely recovered. And, the Holocaust was an indescribable atrocity which continues to cast a shadow over Jewish/Christian relations. Black/Jewish relationships, thank God, are strong and vital. We Jews, both in Israel and the United States are playing the complaint game with the Moslems & Palestinians.

But this culture of complaint, this competition to gain a moral advantage by claiming you have suffered more, was wrong and is wrong for a whole lot of reasons. First of all, it does not work. Telling people they owe you something because you have suffered, occasionally evokes sympathy, but more often evokes a sense of resentment, especially if it's phrased as a demand rather than a plea. Moreover, at least as far as Jewish history is concerned, it's historically inaccurate. No matter what you remember being taught in Hebrew school, no

matter what your grandmother told you about how hard it is to be a Jew, the fact of the matter is that Jewish history is not primarily an account of persecution and suffering. It is primarily a story of great historic and spiritual achievement.

A few years ago, I visited the new Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. If you have not been there, let me tell you it is a stunning achievement. The building is an architectural masterpiece. It manages to be soaring and elegant and spacious, and at the same time feel heavy and confining. The displays are expertly done. But as I was going through the museum, and being deeply moved by it, there was another voice inside my head offering a counter argument, saying "If we have the attention of the American public for one hour, would this really be the message we want to give them?"

The Jew as victim? Is this what we want these Girl Scouts from Georgia and these tourists from Kansas, and these Black teenagers from the District of Columbia to learn about the Jews, how much we have suffered? On the one hand, we have the obligation to tell the story because there are so many people who doubt it, who don't want to believe it, and because the last wish of so many of the victims was that they not be forgotten, that their story be told to the world. But on the other hand there are too many Christians and too many Jews who find it convenient to summarize all of Judaism in that image of the Jew as victim – Christians because it confirms their belief that Jews being eternally punished for having rejected Jesus and Jews because it enables them to avoid taking the real message of Judaism seriously.

But most of Jewish history is not about persecution and martyrdom. The communities that Hitler destroyed were great, creative communities. You are talking about the piety and scholarship of Eastern Europe. We are talking about the German-speaking Jewish communities of Europe that gave the world Einstein and Freud, and Kafka and Mahler. If the only thing the world comes to know about those communities is that a man named Hitler came along and killed them, that's like writing a book about American history that tells you nothing about Abraham Lincoln except that he was assassinated. Where is the museum about what Jews have done for the world, to stand along side the museum about what the world has done to the Jews?

The third thing that is wrong with that emphasis on victimhood is that it's educationally and psychologically dysfunctional. Tell a child that "the whole world is against us" and he is likely to wonder if maybe the whole world is not right. It's hard for a young person to stand up to the opinion of the whole world. He may end up – especially if he is insecure to begin with – siding with the

bullies instead of the victims. It seems safer. So you get black children who want to play with blonde Barbie dolls, and black adults who gain status in the black community by being relatively light-skinned. You get Jews who tell jokes that perpetuate anti-Semitic stereotypes, and who still think it is a compliment to be told, "You don't look Jewish." And perhaps worst of all, you find these members of minority groups looking for someone to hate so that they can be in the majority for a change, the victimizer rather than the victim.

More than that, there is the danger that this rooting of one's identity in a sense of victimization – this emphasis of Jewish suffering or black suffering, or the oppression of women – this constant harping on "Look what the world has done to us," will breed a sense of passivity. It frees you from responsibility. Your situation is now somebody else's fault, and there is nothing you can or need to do about it. If you are having trouble making a success of your life, it can be very tempting to put the blame on somebody else rather than come to terms with your own limitations.

But the dangerous corollary of that thinking is that it leaves you with a sense of helplessness, a feeling that you cannot do anything about it. If the comfort level of some Jews in this country is a function of anti-Semitism – how many anti-Semites there are and how hard they work at it. If anti-Semitism is the only barrier to assimilation and the only real reason for remaining Jewish, and if the only reason we can give our children not to intermarry is that deep down Gentiles really dislike us, then our enemies, not we, will have the power to decide how Jewish we and our children will be.

Now if this process of rooting so much of our identity in a sense of victimhood is factually wrong and psychologically crippling, why are so many people doing it? Partly, there is something perversely satisfying about seeing yourself as a victim. It lets you feel morally superior. It lets you excuse yourself for moments of callousness or bigotry by letting your say, "After what they have done to us, I don't owe them anything."

But I think a large part of it is the widespread assumption that if you do it right, you can go through your whole life without ever being hurt, and if should you ever feel pain, you are entitled to have somebody make it up to you. Should life hurt, should life be periodically unfair? You are not only entitled to say, "That was wrong," you are entitled to say, "That was wrong and I am going to find out whose fault it was and be compensated."

Example: In the past few months I have read no fewer than four articles in Jewish publications on the notion that it is cruel and barbaric to subject a eight-days-old Jewish boy baby to bris, a ritual circumcision. Behind the argument is the thoroughly unrealistic attitude of so many young parents that “I don’t want a child of mine to find out that life is painful.” Now aside from the fact that there is no reason to believe that circumcision at that age is particularly painful, and aside from the fact that this is a ritual that has been performed ten’s of millions of times, with no evidence that Jewish men are traumatized by it, what about the idea that it is part of one’s Jewish identity? Part of what it means to be a Jew. The recognition that if you do it right, life will be painful because you will be sensitive to all the things that go wrong in the world? This is not the Jew as victim, it’s the Jew as a person who cares deeply about injustice, whether done to him or to someone else. I think one of the classic statements of what it means to be Jewish is in the movie “Annie Hall” where the Woody Allen character wants to go to see a five hour movie about the Holocaust, while his non-Jewish girlfriend wants to go to be entertained.

If you don’t teach your children that feeling pain is an indispensable part of being an honorable human being, where will they learn to remain in a relationship when the fun and novelty have worn off? Where will they learn to take care of you when you are old and needy, and caring for a sick and needy parent is not anyone’s idea of fun, if you have taught them that they never have to do anything painful?

Second example: the parents who come to the Religious School office to complain that their children are not enjoying Religious School. “It’s not fun.” And the parents – maybe the same parents – who complain to the public schools, that because of all their other commitments and favorite television programs [which can be very educational], a few hours of homework a night is the most their children can handle. No, it’s probably not fun to sit in a classroom several hours a day. Learning may be rewarding; it may be enriching, but there are a lot of things that are more fun.

But life is more than a search for pleasure and avoidance of pain. That is the kind of life that animals live. For human beings life is a search for meaning and an avoidance of triviality. For the mature person, life is a matter of understanding that the path of fulfillment sometimes passes through the door marked “pain.”

Athletes understand that. They understand that they cannot rely on natural ability. They have to subject themselves to strenuous conditioning drills to be the ballplayers they want to be. Musicians understand that. They know they

have to spend hours on routine exercises before they can create beauty. People on diets understand that. They know that in order to look and feel the way they want to look and feel, they cannot phrase the question in terms of “what would be the most fun to eat?” And college students have to learn that college is a place to acquire wisdom, a place to stretch your mind, not a place to have a blast for four years before facing the responsibilities of the real world.

In a similar way there is a whining about politics, about public service because we have been hurt and disappointed so often by public officials we trusted. A generation that gave its heart to John Kennedy had its heart broken first when he was killed and then again when we learned details of his private life. And because of that experience and many others, we are reluctant to give our hearts away again, in the coming election. We suspect the worst of everyone in public life. And how do you calculate the harm done to the American civic structure by a mindset that says of everyone running for public office “you cannot trust them, they are all a bunch of phonies”?

We play it safe. We are careful not to give our hearts away without a guarantee that we will not be disappointed this time. We go around wearing a suit of armor so that nobody can hurt us. And as a result we feel no pain, but we feel no joy, no hope. We don't feel anything. Our lives are numb, anesthetized.

I think that explains, in part, why so many Christians are leaving the conventional mainline churches for the fundamentalist evangelical gatherings where the emotional temperature is higher. And it explains the secret, grudging envy many of us feel for the Hassidim. We cannot accept their ideas about the world, and we are not about to adopt their lifestyle, but we wish we could believe what we believe as fervently as they believe. We wish we were brave enough to really believe in something. To root our lives in something that would permit us to take up the armor and dare to feel again.

My friend, being a Jew is not a matter of setting yourself up to suffer, to be a victim. Maybe a 100 years ago, in Russia, that was the case. Maybe 65 years ago in Germany. But even then, I suspect, the years of holiness outweighed the weeks and months of anguish. To be a serious Jew does not put you in line to suffer, but it does expose you to pain – the pain of being alive, the pain of making difficult moral choices, the pain of knowing how far short the world has fallen of what God wants it to be. But it is only by feeling that pain that we know that we are alive. We can cut our hair or our fingernails and not feel it because those are dead cells. But cut into living flesh and it hurts, precisely because it is alive.

To hide from pain is to hide from life for fear that life might hurt. To shield our children from knowing that life is sometimes painful is to anesthetize them against the whole range of feelings that go with being alive. The real pain that goes with being Jewish is not the pain of the victim, the pain that robs life of its meaning. It is more like the pain of a woman in labor, that pain that gives birth to a new life.

When Rachel, the wife of Jacob, in the Bible gives birth to a son, after years of childlessness, she names him Joseph, which means "increase," and saying as she does, "Yisef li Adonai ben acher" May God increase my family and give me more children." She has just gone through the pain of childbirth, and her first prayer is that she undergoes that pain again because it is the kind of pain that enhances life.

In the words of Kahlil Gibran "The deeper a groove pain carves in us, the more joy we will be able to contain." A friend of mine, when he learned that he had cancer, responded not by asking, "Why me?" but by asking, "What can I learn from this? How can I grow from the result? This is a once in a lifetime experience, and I don't want to waste it on self pity."

My friends, the pain the Jew feels when he identifies with the oppressed, the pain a Jew feels when he stands up for what is right but unpopular, the pain of having to give up something you want because it conflicts with something you believe in – that is not the pain of being a victim. That is the pain that increases life. When we pray this morning for a year of life, we are not asking for a year free from all pain. That would be a year of numbness, a year spent under anesthesia, a year of not being truly alive. We ask instead for the ability to accept the pain that is an inevitable part of being alive, of being human and being Jewish.

We pray that, if we must feel pain during the coming year -- and if we are to be human, then we will feel it – whether it be growing pain, the pain of shedding bad habits that confine us from growing into new areas of life. Let it be not the pain of the victim, but the pain of the person who cares, the person who dares to love, to share, to feel the anguish of another soul."

Remember us unto life, O Lord, and if we must feel pain, let it be the pain that reminds us that we are most authentically Jewish and most truly alive.