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Growing up as a young teenager, I can recall the vivid imagery and depictions of suffering and horror that the Jewish people had experienced throughout many centuries. I also was taught an extreme veneration of Jewish heroes, sages, and rabbinical leaders. As such, my perceptions of Jewish life, throughout history, consisted of persecution, hate, slaughter, and anti-Semitism. Learning of Jews being devoured by animals in the Roman Colosseum, the massacres of Jews during the Crusades, the persecution of Converso Jews during the Spanish Inquisition, and the mass extermination of European Jewry during the Holocaust, all contributed to my initial grim and dark perceptions of how to view the lives of my Jewish ancestry and heritage, as well as my future life in a cruel and malevolent society that seemed to have an irrational fear for those who professed or were born to a Jewish identity.

A possible reason for the history of the Jewish people being depicted as a history filled with suffering and persecution stems from the complex nature and identity that the notion of anti-Semitism plays in Jewish culture and identity. Following this principle, Jewish suffering and persecution is based upon an irrational hate for the Jewish people—a burden the Jewish people must endure until the coming of the Jewish messiah and an intervention by the Almighty. Consequently, the association of anti-Semitism with Jewish History creates negative ramifications for the future of a contemporary Jewish society, as well as its relationship to a broader global society.

Firstly, framing Jewish life and culture within the context of anti-Semitism serves to differentiate and separate “us” Jews, from “them”, i.e., a larger global society that possesses an irrational hate for the Jewish people. Furthermore, the separation and divide between Judaism and an omnipresent world culture, as a result of anti-Semitism, creates the impression that identifying with Judaism is in direct contradiction with the universal values and customs of modern contemporary society. Secondly, viewing the history of the Jewish people in terms of a seemingly endless cycle of violence and persecution does not bode well for the hopes and aspirations of younger generations. Looking back at the suffering of their Jewish ancestors creates a sense of despair toward the future.

Throughout my childhood and teenage years, I was ingrained with the mentality of a constant anti-Semitism intertwined within the framework of Jewish History. This mentality created a personal conflict and, at the time, unanswerable questions. How would I live in a society that had an irrational fear and hatred against my professed Jewish identity? Learning about the suffering and persecution of my Jewish ancestors, I wondered if my future would entail similar forms of suffering and persecution. In retrospect, my questions were not wrong or misguided, but rather it was my perceptions and

definitions of the history of the Jewish people that were misunderstood.

An additional problematic component of traditional learning of Jewish History that I had been exposed to was in regard to the extreme reverence for the exploits of Jewish heroes and heroines, as well as scholars and rabbinical leaders of the past. The closer Jewish leaders were to the Second Temple and biblical eras, the higher level of "holy" or divine their status would be to their future descendants. Consequently, as each incoming generation is a further lifetime away from biblical times, each incoming generation is viewed with a constant diminishing value in spirituality and righteousness compared with previous generations. In retrospect, I can see two potential problems in regard to the extreme veneration of past historical figures in Jewish History. First, the elevation of Jewish figures to such a degree conflicts with the Jewish importance of venerating God and his commandments. Second, on a personal note, the intense veneration of historical figures in Jewish history had them appear inhuman from my perspective, and as a result I did not see them as relatable.

As I grew older and entered University, I began to realize that there was much more to Jewish History than I had been exposed to. With mentorship and guidance from University professors and advisors, I began to view Jewish History in a more complex manner. I began to study different topics in Jewish History that I was never exposed to before; topics that I perceived to conflict with my beliefs on Judaism as a result of my previous outlook on the History of the Jewish people. I learned of many different sects of Judaism, including, among others, Sadducees, Essenes, Karaites, and Samaritans, all of which professed beliefs about Judaism that were different from my own. I was introduced to the historical background of the Maccabean revolt, and I discerned that the story of Hanukkah was not a revolt against the Seleucid Greeks and was in reality primarily a civil war between Jews over the impact of Greek customs and values on Jewish society. Furthermore, I identified Jewish leaders and their constituents interacting with their neighbors and being part of and contributing to a greater global society.

With further study, I began to view the history of the Jewish people in addition to great Jewish figures and leaders in a more relatable society that somewhat resembled the modern contemporary society in which I reside. Retrospectively, I do not view Jewish History in terms of the extensive persecution of Jews and to the extreme veneration of Jewish historical leaders. Conversely, I see a past where I imagine my fellow ancestors staying true to their religious beliefs while dealing with internal obstacles within their local Jewish communities as well as the broader environment surrounding them. Like today, there was division among Jewish communities, and as in contemporary times, Jews have dealt with times of persecution in addition to times of prosperity from their non-Jewish neighbors.

As an aside, I do not mean to fully discredit the value of elements of Jewish History to which I had previously been exposed. Persecution of Jews has been a common theme throughout history and should be acknowledged. Similarly, there have been many great religious, political, and military Jewish leaders that should be venerated for their extraordinary leadership. Nevertheless, these features, mentioned above, if taught and studied on their own, persist to take away the humanity and importance of the common people of the past. Additionally, these features serve to alienate contemporary members of society as they evoke messages of persecution, suffering, and unworthiness. As such, the study of Jewish History should be based upon the pretext of discussing the complexities and divisions of different Jewish communities in addition to their complex relationship with their non-Jewish neighbors. Furthermore, the involvement of past Jewish historical leaders and local Jewish communities with their larger global society should be identified and addressed. By adding these new elements in the traditional study of Jewish History, the History of the Jewish people will represent a more authentic outlook in addition to being more relatable to contemporary Jewish society.