

# JEWS VS. JUDAISM

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

*"Lech-Lecha Me'Artzecha: Go, get out of your land, from your birthplace, and the house of your fathers, to the land which I will show you." [12:1]*

If we look back at the end of the previous Parsha, we see that Avram's father Terach also left for Canaan: "And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of Avram his son, and he went out with them from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to Charan and they settled there. And Terach lived for 205 years, and Terach died in Charan." [11:31-32]

Terach, like Avram, recognized a need to separate himself, to dedicate himself to G-d in some way. But unlike Avram, he did not complete the task. He did half the job. He left Ur Kasdim, the land where they were surrounded by idolatry, but never reached the Holy Land which the Jewish people were destined to inherit. Terach, father of Avraham, could have been the first of the founding forefathers of the Jewish people, but he didn't make it.

Avram's brother Haran came even closer, without even leaving. The Medrash tells us how Haran died. Avram was thrown into the fire in Ur Kasdim by the ruler, Nimrod, for the crime of smashing Terach's idols. Haran was unsure whose side to take. So he said to himself, "if Avram survives, I will take his side; if he dies, I will say I am on Nimrod's side."

When Avram emerged unscathed, Haran claimed to take his side -- at which point, he, too, was thrown into the fire. The Medrash says that he was not harmed on the outside, but his insides melted and he died. His public declaration protected him -- but like the declaration itself, the protection was only skin deep.

Building the Jewish people involved much more than simply leaving idolatry, or making a show of being Jewish. Eating "kosher-style" deli was never the same thing as keeping Kosher. Judaism required dedication to a new mission, to a life filled with a love of G-d and our unique relationship with Him as Jews. At that involved Avram consciously differentiating himself from those around him. He had to leave his home to go to a new place.

Several years ago, one of our teachers issued his regular weekly class. The topic was breaking down barriers between Jews, and he told a story from his sister's childhood which showed how even language barriers must be overcome. While describing the background against which the story took

place, he referred to his home community, a current "haven" of Jewish life, as having been a "spiritual wasteland" at the time.

One of our readers, a great friend of Project Genesis, took serious offense. He had lived in that community himself, and referred to it as a vibrant one -- with literally tens of thousands of Jews.

Who was right?

As our parsha tells us, it takes more than Jews to build a Jewish community. Avram only became Avraham, father of the Jewish people, when he demonstrated his willingness to follow G-d, reached Canaan, and set out to build a new nation.

The Rabbi did not say there were no Jews; he questioned whether there was Judaism. And in his own defense, he offered the following observations:

- \* There was only one kosher bakery, and no supervised kosher restaurant.
- \* There was not one Torah study group or Talmud class.
- \* No Shabbos activities for kids
- \* No Jewish book library or tape library.
- \* People did not know what a Sukkah was.
- \* There were Yom Kippur gala dances rather than self-improvement lectures.

In other words, both were right. The community had lots of Jews, but it was a spiritual wasteland. Unfortunately, we have seen this in many Jewish communities in this country. Did American Jews build Jewish life, or did they merely find places for Jews to settle together for a generation or so, until the Jews became sufficiently assimilated into American society?

Is a "Yom Kippur dance" representative of "vibrant Jewish life," or "Judaism dying a slow death?"

The results of the latest National Jewish Population Survey are now emerging. After the last one in 1990, the Jewish federation system went into what could only be termed an organized panic, elevating "continuity" to the buzzword of choice for the following decade.

After ten years of this, people must have expected the 2000 survey to hint towards the results, because the UJC release spoke about the findings in only the most positive terms. The Jerusalem Post, however, was somewhat more blunt, terming the US Jewish community "older, grayer, and fewer."

We are still guessing at what the final results will be, but one can safely make a few predictions. Because the survey attempted to sample the entire country, we can expect that they will again miss the rapidly ascending population in the midst of the larger decline. The most affiliated Jews, who send their children to Jewish day schools, are hardly fading away. The census of Jewish Day Schools, commissioned by the Avi Chai foundation in the late 1990s, is anything but gloomy. Our schools are bursting at the seams -- every year, the population grows larger.

Today, Jewish education keeps the Jewish people alive. We know that from Torah, Talmud, and even from the population surveys. The Talmud says that every House of Torah Study is like a piece of Israel. Even a single person who studies Torah brings the Divine Presence near. And that is what we must do. Like Avram, who left his home to come closer to G-d, we must dedicate ourselves to G-d's Torah in order to be part of the Jewish future.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken