

Why civilizations fail? A moral and spiritual issue



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In a recent blog, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks addresses the question of "Why Civilizations Fail." He begins by quoting Moses:

"Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God. ... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ... You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' ... If you ever forget the Lord your God ... I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed." (Deut. 8:11-19)

Sacks, reflecting on this passage, continues with the warning that it is not the suffering in the wilderness that is the real test. The real challenge will begin "precisely when all your physical needs are met — when you have land and sovereignty and rich harvests and safe homes — that your

spiritual trial will commence."

This is seen as an early version of what many historians have observed over the centuries as they look at the history of civilizations. Sacks points to the 14th century Islamic thinker, Ibn Khaldun, who, in his introduction to history, was one of the first to observe that great civilizations become too comfortable and complacent leading to a period of decay and eventual decline.

In his "History of Western Philosophy," Bertrand Russell notes a similar pattern in what he considered to be examples of great civilizations. In his introduction he notes: "What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared ... the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilized than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion."

British historian of the last century, Arnold Toynbee, studied 26 different civilizations in his 12-volume "A Study of History." I don't claim to have read this major work but, according to Britannica on the web, he concluded: "Civilizations declined when their leaders stopped responding creatively, and the civilizations then sank

owing to the sins of nationalism, militarism, and the tyranny of a despotic minority." The Britannica also noted that Toynbee "saw history as shaped by spiritual, not economic forces."

Sacks summarizes this spiritual decline as: "Inequalities will grow. The rich will become self-indulgent. The poor will feel excluded. There will be social divisions, resentments and injustices. Society will no longer cohere. People will not feel bound to one another by a bond of collective responsibility. Individualism will prevail. Trust will decline. Social capital will wane."

Sacks suggests that this decline is not inevitable and proposes three rules to guard against it.

Rule 1: Never forget where you came from.

He admonishes us to focus on justice, caring for the poor, ensuring dignity for everyone and "making sure there are always prophets to remind the people of their destiny and expose the corruptions of power."

Rule 2: Never drift from your foundational principles and ideals.

"Societies start growing old when they lose faith in the transcendent. They then lose faith in an objective moral order and end by losing faith in themselves."

Rule 3: A society is as strong as its faith.

This faith is necessary in order "to honor the needs of others as well as ourselves ... (and) give us the humility that alone has the power to defeat the arrogance of success and self-belief."

As I reflect on these observations from the ancient and more recent prophets, I can't help but wonder if we have already gone too far down this path of spiritual decline. Have we lost our social cohesion? Do we honor the needs of others, especially the poor? Have we lost faith in a moral order? Is it too late to regain a collective responsibility? When hate becomes respectable or when peaceful protest becomes violent, have we lost our sense of community and respect for others?

Sacks also points out that prophets do not predict — they warn. "If a prediction comes true it has succeeded; if a prophecy comes true it has failed. The prophet tells of the future that will happen if we do not heed the danger and mend our ways."

We need prophets like Rabbi Sacks as we seek "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8)

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