

POGROM SURVIVORS SHOW SPUNKY ATTITUDE

You have to admire spunk. That's when an outclassed prize fighter bounces up even though he's been punched down for the third time.

Spunk is the mettle some underdogs show when they refuse to give in and then manage to scrape a minor victory out of a potential rout.

The Jewish scriptures tell the story of that kind of spunk. Also known by Christians as the Old Testament, these writings hang together around a spunky theme.

They reflect the experience of a beleaguered people who time and again manage to survive near annihilation. They not only live to tell the story, they even manage to turn the near disaster into an occasion for a party.

On at least three occasions the Israelite people were victims of pogroms. And in each case their escape led to the founding of a new holiday celebration.

The pattern was set near the beginning of their national history. According to the book of Exodus, the semi-nomadic clans of Semites collectively known as Israelites were at one time virtual slaves under the pharaohs of Egypt.

The impression is that the Hebrews were caught in a three-point squeeze play which almost erased them from history. Their forced labor at the royal building projects undermines their physical stamina. The suppression of their clan religion threatens their sense of national identity. And an on-again off-again policy of drowning male Hebrew infants practically ensures their extinction.

But according to the biblical record, the Lord finds a leader for the Israelite in the person of Moses. He leads their miraculous escape *via* the Sea of Reeds and sets them on a course for their ancestral homeland.

Part and parcel of their escape plan is the eating of a special meal of roast lamb and half-baked bread. This is but the first in a series of annual Passover Seders repeated for centuries to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt.

A second instance in which a pogrom against the Jews resulted in the establishment of another holiday is in the book of Esther.

Scholars debate whether this book is sober history or romantic fiction. In either event, it underscores the spunky attitude of the Jewish scriptures.

Again the story is set in a foreign territory, not the Hebrews' homeland. In this case it is the Persian Empire at a time following the deportation of many Jews into exiled communities.

The hero and heroine of this rather involved plot are a Jewish court functionary named Mordecai and his cousin Esther, whose prize for winning a beauty pageant is the queen's crown. The villain is the empirical vice-regent, a scoundrel named Haman.

The long and short of the story is that when Haman tries to exterminate all the Jews in the empire, he is thwarted by Esther. She cons her royal husband into reversing Haman's pogrom.

The villain is subsequently hanged, the Jews are avenged, and their reprieve is celebrated with a new festival. Known as the Feast of Purim, this no-holds-barred fete developed into an annual nationalistic rally.

The third example is in the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees. It's a case in which the Jewish homeland is under the thumb of a foreign power.

During the course of the oppression inflicted by the Greek rulers of Syria, the temple at Jerusalem is desecrated. The main altar is profaned, probably by offerings to deities other than the Lord God.

When the pressure becomes intolerable, a father-and-sons team of soldiers, popularly known as the Maccabees, begin an underground resistance movement.

Their first hit-and-run successes attract additional recruits for their guerrilla forces. Eventually they trounce the occupation troops, free the capital, and rededicate the temple.

The rededication ceremony turns into another annual holiday. The eight-day festival, known as Hanukkah or Lights, is the last in the series of biblical holidays which commemorate close escapes. In each case an anti-Jewish pogrom eventuates into a new festival.

That's the kind of spunk which runs like a thread through the documents now enshrined in the Jewish scriptures.

It's the kind of up-beat, never-say-die attitude which turns these ancient documents into a 21st century treat. For this sort of optimistic reading of history is the perfect antidote for so much pessimism on the contemporary scene.