

Rabbi Lewis' Message for December 2007

I had forgotten that nothing makes you feel so American as spending Thanksgiving in a foreign country. During my week in Berlin, we ate Thanksgiving dinner three times. One was a dry official function of the Fulbright Commission, a formal occasion held in conjunction with an international think tank in Germany. A second was an intimate potluck with twelve twenty-somethings, Germans and Americans. A third was a convivial gathering of fifty (mostly) American ex-patriates, many of whom were meeting each other for the first time but had been connected with each other via an e-mail from friends-of-friends in Berlin. While they didn't all serve turkey, all these dinners were filled with a feeling of American solidarity brought on by being a minority in Germany. We Americans asked each other: Where would you be having Thanksgiving dinner if you were you back in the States? What would you be eating? Who else would be sitting around the table?

At each of these dinners, someone asked me what I thought of Berlin. On one level, that was an easy question to answer. I was seeing Berlin with Gideon and through Gideon's eyes; how could that not be wonderful? On another level, of course, that is not what they were asking. They were asking how I, as an American, experienced a country that had once been an enemy. Those who knew I was Jewish were asking how I experienced a country that had tried to exterminate my people.

And my answer to that was: I didn't know. I had all kinds of feelings that I assumed I would sort out once I arrived back in the States. Now that I am back, I think it is going to take me a long time to figure out how I feel.

Contemporary Berlin is not the Berlin of World War II, although reminders of the war are still everywhere, especially in that part of Berlin that was once on the eastern side of the Berlin Wall. This is no longer the Germany where you look into the faces of people on the street and wonder where they were during the war. Just as the American soldiers who fought in World War II are now old, so are the Germans. It won't be long before they are gone. And it will remain for us to tell their story.

But what story to tell? The Germans of this generation don't know how to feel or behave. They don't ask to be relieved of responsibility for a heinous crime perpetrated by their grandparents, but they do wonder for how long they will have to bear the guilt. They bend over backwards to memorialize the Jews who were murdered, but the reality is that the only Jews they know (if they know any) are recent Russian arrivals. I met a woman named Levine who changed her name when she married her German husband because she couldn't stand the sycophantism of Germans who recognized her name as Jewish. In addition, the Berliners of the East tell a different story from their western compatriots. They both place blame for the war on each other.

We did make a pilgrimage to Sachsenhausen, the concentration camp outside of Berlin. When I took a picture of the words "Arbeit Macht Frei" over the entrance, Gideon asked me what I planned to do with it. I said I didn't know, but I might find a teaching opportunity some day. I think now that it was simply a way of memorializing the moment and saying, "I was here."

As we ate three Thanksgiving dinners, I remembered a different Thanksgiving in Israel some thirty years ago. We were all American students spending the year in Jerusalem. We scoured the markets for turkey and finally found a frozen one that we defrosted in the bathtub of the only Americans we knew who had a bathtub. Then we cooked the turkey in the oven of the only students we knew who had an oven. Never had turkey tasted so good. Never had being an American felt so good.

May this season of lights remind us that we live in a world still waiting for redemption.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis