

Rabbi Lewis' Message for December, 2008

It is quiet here in Auschwitz. The only sound is the crunch of gravel beneath our feet. Even the large tour groups pass each other soundlessly. The lapel microphone worn by our guide carries his voice directly into our individual earphones. Auschwitz is the kind of place where you don't feel like talking.

We had debated making this visit, my children and I. We were already in Krakow, we reasoned: how could we not make the 90 minute trip to the town the Poles call Oswiecim? Shouldn't we go simply out of respect for the dead? But then again, should we go if it is only out of a sense of obligation? What is the point of visiting that terrible site that had become the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe? We had seen the pictures, we had heard the stories, we had read the books and seen the movies. We didn't have to go all the way to Auschwitz to say Kaddish.

In the end, the feeling of wanting to go won out. And we soon discovered that, when you visit Auschwitz, even the simplest acts become charged with meaning. Should we take a bus or a train? The buses are more convenient and run more frequently, but we agree without discussion that we will go by train, one that will roll on those same fateful tracks as the boxcars that had carried so many millions to their deaths. Do we eat lunch as normal on this train or is that somehow a sacrilege? What are the thoughts of the taxi driver who takes us from the train station to the camp? Does he speculate about the motivation of these crazy tourists or is he simply grateful for the job? We wonder: how can you possibly charge an admission fee to a concentration camp? And we discover that someone has thought of this before us, that they handle this well, explaining that the fee is not for admission but for the 4-hour guided tour.

After you pay, you are given a small sticker to place on your outer coat. How can your mind not flash to the yellow stars pinned to the coats of European Jews, or worse, to the identity numbers tattooed on the arms of Auschwitz inmates? The gift shop sells posters marking various commemorations of Auschwitz/Birkenau. Who buys posters like this and where do they display them? The tour guide divides us into two groups, one split off to the left and the other to the right, an innocent direction that calls up images of "selection."

Before the Germans turned it into a killing camp, Auschwitz itself had been designed as barracks for Polish troops. The first people killed there were Polish partisans, political prisoners who were members of the Resistance. You are allowed to take photos outside on the grounds at Auschwitz but not inside. At Birkenau, just minutes down the road, you can take photos anywhere. Birkenau was designed and built with the sole intention of killing millions of Jews, Poles, Roma (Gypsies) and

homosexuals. The Nazis had evacuated and resettled the local population so they could free up 175 hectares for their gas chambers, barracks and crematoria. Birkenau became the central and final destination for Jews shipped in from east and west, north and south. The sudden thought occurred to me that my mother's relatives from Hungary had died here along with my father's relatives from Lvov in eastern Galicia. How strange to consider that two different families, whose only prior common experience was to be joined in death, would one day be joined in life.

Because Birkenau was only partially destroyed by the Nazis in their last desperate days, you can still see the remains of the original crematoria as well as some of the over 300 prison barracks. When the Russians liberated the camp on January 27, 1945, they carefully documented their findings. They preserved the heaps of shoes, locks of women's hair shorn after death, piles of baby clothes and suitcases painstakingly lettered with family names. As the guide describes these artifacts, he manages to strike an appropriate tone. He tells us that even the weather conspired against the inmates with the Nazis. Warm weather encouraged the spread of diseases like typhus; cold weather simply froze people who already had no body fat to warm them. Our guide is a native of Oswiecim. We ask how he feels about the new large homes whose backyards look out onto the remnants of Birkenau. "I could never live there," he says simply.

We observe that the weather matches the mood. Everything looks stark and depressing on this cold and snowy day. The only color to punctuate the grayness comes from two tourists in another group. They are wearing large Israeli flags like capes on their backs. This is the solution the Israelis have found to their own conflict about visiting Auschwitz. Go to Auschwitz but do so defiantly. Go to say Kaddish, but more than that, go to remind the world that we are still here.

And so we did.

As we light our Chanukah candles this month, may our festival of freedom remind us to value that which we too often take for granted.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis