

Thoughts On A Visit to Berlin

Parashat Vayeshev

The following is the sermon given by Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis on November 30, 2007

I grew up with a friend named Monica. We were reminiscing recently about our mothers, why I liked hers and why she liked mine. She liked my mother because my mother was quiet and polite; I liked her mother because her mother was loud and opinionated. I told her I remembered that her mother refused to ride in Volkswagen "Bugs" when we were kids.

I didn't understand it at the time but I know now that she associated them with Hitler and Nazi Germany. That made an impression on me because I hadn't heard anything about Hitler and Nazi Germany in my family. Half my family was German Jews and they were proud of it. There weren't any prejudices against Germans and Germany in my family, at least not any of which I was aware. And yet a few years later, I consciously avoided going to Germany when I traveled in Europe. I told myself I just wasn't interested in going but clearly there was more to it than that if it took me until last week to visit Berlin. If my son Gideon weren't living there this year, I probably would have continued to avoid going.

I am not the only one of course who feels ambivalent about Germany. They are ambivalent about themselves, at least in Berlin, which might not be typical of greater Germany. Should today's Germans be held responsible for what their grandparents did? How can they not feel responsible, but how long do they have to continue to feel guilt for what they themselves didn't do? Should they feel guilty, should they ask for forgiveness? Can they talk about how awful it was for them to live during the war or are they not allowed to feel awful because it was so much worse for Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals? Do you talk about the war or not? How can you talk about it but how can't you talk about it? Do you deliberately memorialize the war or not? Do you forgive or not? Do you forget or not? If ambivalence is about being able to love and hate at the same time, then Berlin is the embodiment of ambivalence.

First and foremost, there is ambivalence about how to relate to Jews. There just isn't an arena for Germans to relate to living Jews. I don't think it is because of anti-Semitism. I think it is that most Berliners of today's generation don't know any Jews. The only Jews in Berlin are the Russians who have come in since the war, a few Israelis and American ex-patriots. Berlin is characterized by the absence of Jews everywhere you look. Jews had founded all the department stores but those founders are long gone. There is a memorial called the Missing House Memorial. It is an empty lot between two houses.

"The old apartment house had been destroyed by aerial bombardment in February, 1945. In 1990, French artist Christian Boltanski and his students did research on the site, found that all the former residents were Jews, and constructed a memorial space dedicated to 'absence.' The signs indicate the names of the residents and approximate place where they lived in the building, their dates of birth and death, and occupations, which went across class lines.

Plaques indicate the approximate space occupied by Jewish and non-Jewish residents, testifying to a diversity that was lost with Nazi decrees against the Jews and removal of the Jewish population from Berlin." (Internet)

There are Jewish tourist attractions but no Jews. You can recognize all the Jewish sites - museums, cemeteries, monuments, because they have concrete round barriers in front and are patrolled 24/7 by German police. They are so afraid that something will happen that it gives people the impression there is something to be afraid of. It keeps people afraid and away. When they meet real Jews, they are awkward.

Let me give you the example of one small incident. At Thanksgiving dinner - one of the three we ate - I sat across from John, a young American student, and his girlfriend who is a German doctor. The doctor asked if Thanksgiving and Christmas were equally important holidays in the States or if you would be more likely to make it home for one over the other. I deferred to John, who answered. His girlfriend then asked about food; what did we normally eat on Christmas, was it like what we were eating on Thanksgiving? Again, I deferred to John who said that his family ate ham but that my family was Jewish and didn't celebrate Christmas. Conversation came to a grinding halt. So I told her that Jews in the States have the Christmas tradition of eating Chinese food since that is the only restaurant open on Christmas. We all laughed and moved on, but it was a small example of the discomfort, the fear of saying the wrong thing, the fear of seeming too friendly or not friendly enough.

I mentioned in [my December newsletter message](#) that I met an American woman named Anna Winger. She married a German and lives in Berlin. Her name used to be Levine. She said she changed it because, she said, "I got tired of Germans sucking up to me because I'm Jewish." Again, I don't mean to imply that the Berliners I met were prejudiced. That wasn't what I experienced. They were just confused and ambivalent about what the right thing were to say.

I can't blame them because I was ambivalent, too. I also didn't know what would be the right thing for them to say. What do we Jews want from today's Germans? I don't know the answer either. I know that people asked me how I felt about Berlin. I loved Berlin - but sometimes I felt uncomfortable and sometimes I even hated Berlin. I couldn't always predict when I would feel love and when I would feel hate.

Not surprisingly, I felt both at the [Jewish Museum](#). The Jewish Museum is devoted to the history of Jews in Germany, not just the period of the Holocaust. Jewish life made an amazing cultural contribution to Germany over the centuries. How could I not go through that museum and wonder how Berlin could have murdered such a thriving integrated Jewish community? The architecture of the museum is designed to give you the experience of something missing. There are darkened halls and slanted walls and even an empty interior courtyard.

You can't help but be aware of who isn't there when you are in Berlin. When you walk around the central area of Berlin, you see small brass plaques embedded in the sidewalks.

"They are called 'stumbling stones' - or Stolpersteine in German - and are the creation of the Cologne-based sculptor [Gunter Demnig](#). Around Berlin, mostly in the Kreuzberg and Mitte districts, there are 1,400 of them. The artist laid the first memorial stone ten years ago and his project has resonated widely in Germany and across Europe. So far Demnig has installed over 11,000 stones in his Germany, as well as in Austria, Italy, Holland and Hungary. The idea for the Stolpersteine came to him when an elderly woman approached him while he was working on another project in 1993 - one which traced the path of the gypsies that were forced into deportation camps. The woman said: 'It's nice what you are doing but gypsies didn't live here'. Demnig thought, maybe she never knew that her neighbors were gypsies. This commentary was the catalyst for his valiant artistic project. The 60-year-old artist named his project Stolpersteine because their purpose is to make passers-by 'stumble' over these stones and think about the past on an intimate level. '(Stolpersteine) is personal, big monuments are abstract,' Demnig said when he presented the project over a decade ago. Throughout Germany there are numerous monuments to commemorate the victims of National Socialism. However, they symbolize a collective loss, a mass of peoples with no real individual identity. But with Demnig's project, one by one, the names of the victims return to their homes. 'Auschwitz was the destination and end point, but the unimaginable, the horror began in these flats and houses,' the artist said." (Vera von Kreutzbruck)

You can't walk down those sidewalks without feeling conflicted. The city is ambivalent about itself, I think. Trying to meld its old two halves is still an ongoing effort. It is a city in transition almost like an adolescent having an identity crisis. You can't become a teenager with an identity of your own without going back to your childhood and figuring out who you were then.

How should Berliners relate to their history? Because they have to relate to it if they want to figure out who they are now. They can't ignore it but they can't honor it. You see this ambivalence expressed in how they relate to certain city buildings and in which buildings they save. Someone said that whoever controls the city's buildings controls its history and I think that is true. If Nazis used the building, do you destroy it or will you be accused of trying to deny the memory of Nazism? What if the building originally wasn't a Nazi building but was only used by the Nazis? Can it be rehabilitated?

And then there is the complicating factor that the wall divided the city for years, resulting in a continuing ambivalence of the West for the East and the East for the West. For example, the current German government has decided to "deconstruct" the old Palast der Republik which is "a glaring symbol of East Germany, an incarnation which today's Germany finds alternatively embarrassing, kitsch or anathema, none of which characteristics fits into the current establishment's view of itself... The doomed Palast der Republik has received support from a perhaps unlikely source: Berlin's flourishing artistic community, which has used it to stage concerts and shows and many of whom have no negative associations with it." (David Gordon Smith)

The artist community is part of what makes the city an exciting cosmopolitan place, full of artistic and intellectual ferment. It has created a nightlife that begins at midnight and goes on until the late afternoon. Because housing is cheap, actors and directors and musicians and

writers can afford to live there. Artists don't look at the buildings the same way politicians and historians do. And maybe instead of worrying so much about what to say, they just express their feelings in their work.

When I told my friend Monica about my memory of her mother's not riding in Volkswagen Bugs, she said that sounded like her mother. I don't know if Monica's mother ever changed her mind about that or ever forgave the Germans for the war. I don't know where I stand, either, and I found myself thinking about a Hasidic story told by Elie Wiesel about "a wealthy Jewish timber merchant in Eastern Europe who settles himself comfortably into his seat on a train. Just before departure an aged, somewhat unkempt, malodorous rabbi settles into the same compartment. Throughout the journey the merchant pointedly, and with fastidious disdain, ignores the old man.

When the train arrives at its destination, the merchant sees hundreds of people milling about in eager anticipation. [Whom do they await with such excitement?] He discovers that the object of their devotion is the old rabbi whom he had so rudely snubbed. The rabbi, he learns, is widely regarded in pious communities as a living saint who possesses profound wisdom and a reputation as a healer.

The merchant pushes his way through the ecstatic crowd to find the old rebbe: "Rabbi," the merchant pleads, "please forgive me for my rudeness and please say a prayer for my son, who is chronically ill." The old rabbi responds: "Be assured that I will pray for your son, who, God willing, will gain his health. However, I cannot forgive you. If you want forgiveness, you must seek it from [that old man on the train]." (As told by Laurence Cunningham, adapted)

From whom should the Germans ask forgiveness? Not from us; they have to ask it from the Jews who aren't there anymore. And we have yet to figure out how that should happen.

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