

My Poland Summer Vacation
Parashat Devarim
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Joey Baron
Temple Aliyah, Needham

Shabbat shalom!

Of what use are your many sacrifices to Me? says the Lord. I am sated with the burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle; and the blood of bulls and sheep and he-goats I do not want.

when you come to appear before Me, who requested this of you, to trample My courts?:

You shall no longer bring vain meal-offerings, it is smoke of abomination to Me; New Moons and Sabbaths, calling convocations, I cannot [bear] iniquity with assembly.

Your New Moons and your appointed seasons My soul hates, they are a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing [them].

And when you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you, even when you pray at length, I do not hear; your hands are full of blood.

Today I want to talk about how I spent my summer vacation. Because it has left me quite confused and overwhelmed... which is how you may feel when I'm done.

It seems appropriate for this Shabbat Chazon, the day before Tisha B'Av to talk about today's haftarah. Isaiah shares his vision with the people of Judea right around the time that their brethren in the kingdom of Israel (the ten tribes) were exiled. The state has been destroyed, its people banished. Isaiah urges those who are left to look at the destruction that so many had gone through, and learn the appropriate lesson.

There are sages who teach that the Moshiach will be born on Tisha B'Av, reinforcing the idea that redemption can only occur after destruction.

Which brings me to my recent trip to Poland.

It was a simply amazing trip, yet there was nothing simple about it. It was week full of inspiration, confusion, and juxtapositions.

And it starts even before I leave.

I'm in a Lyft, going to the airport. and we're stuck in traffic. The nice Dominican woman who is my driver pulls out some flash cards and starts studying.

"What are you studying for?"

My citizenship.

"Would you like me to help you?"

And for the next 10 minutes, I am reading citizenship questions to her and occasionally trying to explain some of the answers she is missing.

And even before I reach for my passport, I have this profound sense that helping an immigrant become a citizen on the way to the airport would be a powerful foundation for my visit to The Krakow Jewish Culture Festival.

This may well be the finest Jewish Culture Festival in the world. In Krakow of all places. Created and directed by a non-Jewish Polish historian and attended primarily by a non-Jewish audience.

Like I said, Poland is full of contradictions.

I always had the impression that Poland was hell for Jews and that the Poles, except maybe for Oskar Schindler, were all too complicit with the Nazis. Yet, current research by Israeli historians is now revealing, Poles were just like other Europeans. Just as many risked death in order to save Jewish lives. Just as many refused to inform on them. And just as many were indifferent, engaged in blackmail, and in even, participated in pogroms.

Suffice it so, the Jewish history of Poland is just a bit complicated.

Jews have lived in Poland for over 1000 years. There have been centuries when more Jews lived in Poland than in anywhere else in the world. Jews were given legal rights there in 1264. By the 1500s, 80% of all living Jews were living in Poland.

When it comes to its Jews, Poland, like everywhere else, fluctuated from tolerance and acceptance to persecution and isolation, just as the country itself fluctuated between being an independent monarchy to Church-dominated to a conquered plaything for Russia, Prussia, Austria, Germany... only to eventually be taken over by Soviet communists.

And, of course, there is World War II. Ninety percent of the Polish Jewish population of over 3 million was murdered in The Holocaust, a number that's half of all the Poles killed during the war.

So with all that in mind, lets talk about some contradictions.

Here's the first of them.

What is a Jewish Culture Festival doing in a place without Jews?

The founder of the Festival is a non-Jewish Pole who moved to Krakow to continue his studies in history. He grew up in a small town that at one point was half Jewish. Yet, he had never met a Jew in his life. Immersing himself in Krakow's history led him to conclude that you could not have a true understanding of Polish history without including the Jewish Polish history. For centuries, Jews contributed to Poland's commerce, to its arts and culture, to its educational and scientific accomplishment.

Though just an hour away, he felt no need to commemorate Auschwitz and Birkenau. That was already being done. But those efforts were centered on the history of the Holocaust, nothing before, nothing after. His goal was to teach about Jewish life of the past but also enable people to experience how vibrant Jewish culture is today.

So he has created a festival where you can tour historic synagogues and cemeteries or go to art exhibits at the Galicia Museum or Krakow JCC. You could go to a Middle Eastern cooking workshop or a seminar on the Vilna Vegetarian Cookbook of 1938. One day, you could listen to the amazing Deborah Lidstad discuss anti-Semitism and the next you could hear her victorious debate on behalf of latkes and against hamantaschen. There were music workshops, crafts projects, Yiddish lessons and sing alongs, and discussions about Israeli politics, the history of Hasidism or an after-hours hip hop party.

Each night, there is a featured concert. This year's lineup included a swing orchestra playing Polish popular music from before the War (many of the songs written by Jews, of course), a 76 year old Moroccan Israeli actress singing with a smoking world music funk band, an American Klezmer revival band, a Moldovan accordion player and his violinist son, and a men's Piyyut ensemble from Jerusalem that I am determined will perform in Boston one day.

All this, all week long for thousands of people who aren't Jewish.

As an American baby boomer Jew, when I think of Poland, I think of Auschwitz. But that, shall we say, is lacking a certain perspective. Today's Poland is far more likely to be influenced by the events of 1989, not 1939. Only 17% of the population is age 65 or older.

And here's where it gets even more confusing. Let's say you were 15 and witnessed the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945. That makes you 89 today. Only 10% of the Polish population today was alive during the Holocaust.

For 40 years after the war, Poland became a plaything for the Soviet Union. So the key reference point for Polish life is now 1989, the year the Russians were overthrown.

It's a significant difference... like the difference between Americans whose key cultural reference point was World War II as compared to Vietnam and or maybe Operation Desert Storm. If you're a 30 year old Pole, you were weren't even alive under Communist rule, never mind during the Nazis. And lots of 30 year old Poles come out to the Festival.

The Festival takes place in the Jewish Quarter, which has its own sets of contradictions. Krakow is one of the largest walled cities in Europe. Originally, the Jewish quarter was within the walls of the city, but right about 1500 when they needed a place for a university, the Jews were relocated to another district, just outside of the old city walls.

During the War, and for decades after, the Jewish quarter was all but deserted. But in 1989, the Jewish Culture Festival started, and today it's an odd combination of historic synagogues and cemeteries and hipster clubs and restaurants.

Here's another good contradiction.

That Friday was the Krakow JCC's Ride for Life, a fundraising bike ride from Berkenau to Krakow, about 60 miles. The ride ends just in time so that riders can change and get ready for an amazing Shabbat dinner for 750 people. And in a room of 750 Jews, of course, I had to run into friends on the Temple Beth Elohim Poland tour. It is incredibly moving to be in a room of 750 people having Shabbas together—in Poland of all places.

But the beauty of that night is juxtaposed against what happened at another historic synagogue where the Gimina, the family/council that was given control over the Jewish assets of Krakow, locked the gates of a synagogue and had armed guards nearby to keep Jews from praying there. And all because the Chabad that was based in the synagogue could not afford a 1000% percent rent increase.

This of course, is the same Gimina that sold another historic synagogue which is now a popular hipster brew pub and café. (Yes the coffee is simply heavenly there.)

How telling that in the midst of all this incredible Jewish art and learning, people got to see another aspect of Jewish culture, *sin'at chinam*, senseless hatred of one Jew to another, which according to the Talmud is why the Second Temple was destroyed.

Now let's lighten the atmosphere a bit. Let's talk about tchotckes. Shopping in Poland can be pretty confusing too. Every tourist shop in Krakow has a shelf filled with statuettes of black coated hasids playing Klezmer Music. How do you prefer your hasids? In wood, plastic or porcelain...clarinet players, drummers, violinists? You pick.

And usually right behind them you'll find a series of pressed metal pictures of all your favorite saints. After all, this is a country where people had a Jew counting money figurine in their homes to help bring them prosperity. I like to think of it as the Polish equivalent of having an Aunt Jemina cookie jar to hold your treats.

And you see the same thing on the street. I walked by one little booth where you could buy tickets for a bus trip to Auschwitz and Birkenau or Schindler's factory and the little shop surrounded by a fence of larger life statues of saints. Maybe they're there to bless you with a safe return.

Here's my favorite example of one of those soul shaking juxtapositions.

On the final Saturday night, there is a giant street party featuring each of the bands who performed during the week. This year, there were over 15,000 people there, mostly in the 20-40 age range—and that's not counting everyone who stayed home and watched it live on Polish national TV.

I'm sitting at a café just on the other side of the police lines that contains the crowd. The people next to me start a conversation. A husband and wife who run a Holocaust teacher training program in New York are there with their 90 year old aunt and two of her grandnieces from Budapest and Germany. Of course, the aunt is a Polish Holocaust survivor living in Tel Aviv, and this, her family figures, will be her last chance to visit.

And all the while that we're talking, no more than 30 feet away, there are thousands of those post-communist young people dancing away. How do you make sense of that?

And while my trip started with a citizenship it ends with a very different set of questions.

We had two guides/chaperones with us whose primary job was to get us to where we wanted to go on time and to keep an eye out for me. I told them that I tend to wander off at these types of festivals but not to worry, I would always find them at the appointed time and place.

On Sunday, we're walking back from the Old City to our hotel to say goodbye when Anna says, "Can I ask you a few questions?"

Of course.

Was the CIA really involved in 9/11?

And while I'm picking my jaw up from the sidewalk, she asks, "And is there really a satanic cabal controlling Hollywood?"

Now, she's not asking me this as if she believes them. But she clearly has heard them and more than once.

So I spend the next 10 minutes explaining what conspiracy theory is. Using the idea that there are people who are convinced the moon landing was all a stunt, I explained how once you decide to believe in one of these theories, there is no way to convince you otherwise.

But I also explained that the Hollywood Cabal is contemporary code for anti-Semitism. Alas, Steven Spielberg and David Geffen do not enjoy a nice Shabbas dinner together plotting how to control the world. The cabal is the modern day equivalent of the blood libel, one more made up reason to believe that the Jews are evil.

A trip that begins with asking questions about becoming a citizen ends with answering ones about cabals and conspiracies.

Experiencing that and coming home to the immigrant crisis today, I sat down to put this dvar together.

I can easily imagine Isaiah standing on in the main square of the Jewish quarter or outside a detention center crying out:

Wash, cleanse yourselves, remove the evil of your deeds from before My eyes, cease to do evil. Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the robbed, perform justice for the orphan, plead the case of the widow....

But he isn't there. It is up to us.