The Miracle of Jewish Life in Kiev

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To be a rabbi is to be a teacher, a messenger, a conveyer of truth, a conduit of our heritage, a teller of stories. Having just returned from leading the mission of the Rabbinic Cabinet of Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) to Kiev and Israel I want to do all this and thereby fulfill another part of what it means to be a rabbi - to touch and inspire people so they will know and appreciate how blessed we are to be part of such a unique people, a people whose hallmark is one of caring and of taking care of each other.

First a few words of background about the sponsors of our trip. The Rabbinic Cabinet which I am privileged to chair is an organization of close to 1,000 North American rabbis from all movements. We work with our local and national Federations to support the philanthropic work of the Jewish community. Part of the work of Federation is to help Jews overseas keep the spark of Judaism alive and to sustain elderly impoverished Jews and children in need. This is done primarily by two organizations.

Established in 1914 and active in more than 70 countries, the Joint Distribution Committee, also known as JDC, or just “The Joint” provides aid to Jews and Jewish communities around the world through a network of social and community assistance programs, as well as contributing millions of dollars in disaster relief to non-Jewish communities. The other organization, The Jewish Agency for Israel, known as JAFI or the Sachnoot, is responsible for immigration and absorption of Jews to Israel and fosters and promotes Jewish identity around the world.

Our mission allowed us to see first-hand what the work we do on behalf of our fellow Jews through these two extraordinary networks. We saw and were proud of how our contributions to the Federation annual campaign literally perform miracles by prolonging and sustaining life.

Our first stop in Kiev, Ukraine was to the outdoor Soviet war memorial, consisting of large imposing sculptures and statues on a hillside to commemorate the tremendous loss of life in World War II. It has a statue larger than the famous statue of Jesus the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro. Looking at the harsh faces and jagged lines of the images, one can feel the rigidity and weight of the oppression, the tremendous loss of life and suffering these people must have endured in the 20th century.

We should never forget the role we Jews played in bringing down the Iron Curtain of the Soviet communist regime. As I pointed out in a meeting with the Minister of Justice it was the activism of Soviet Jews yearning to be free, asking to be reunited with their people in Israel that led to the downfall of the USSR, and paved the way for Ukraine to become an independent nation.

In the 1980’s and ‘90’s over one million Jews left the Soviet Union and came to Israel, transforming the country in many ways. As one person told us, just about every Israeli startup
consists of one native Israeli who is the salesman, and one guy from Russia who is the computer engineer who designs the program. More about what happened in Israel in upcoming weeks.

The first part of our mission focused on what happened to those who stayed behind and their children, the individuals and the offspring of those who could not, or did not make aliyah. Twenty five years ago we thought those who remained and who for whatever reason had chosen not to emigrate were lost to the Jewish world. But, just as I found last year in Budapest, young Jews are discovering their Jewish connections and are interested in seeking a path back to Judaism. It seems they are not yet ready to allow the death knell of the Jewish people to be proclaimed. It is hard to describe or imagine, but they are moved by being Jewish and hunger to affiliate and participate in Jewish life.

A girl we met named Alena was raised by her mother after the divorce of her parents. She remembers that when she was 8 years old, she once joined some friends in taunting an old man and calling him a "Zhid", a derogatory name for Jew. When her mother heard her, she slapped her, without explaining why she was so upset by her behavior. Years later, a Jewish friend invited her to attend a Hillel activity -- a scavenger hunt for places related to Jewish history. Alena saw it as a purely social event and went along. When she told her mother how much she enjoyed it, her mother said to her, "I guess it's in your blood," and proceeded to reveal for the first time to Alena that her father who had since passed away, had been Jewish. Alena started to attend programs sponsored by the Joint and the Jewish Agency. She now works for Hesed, a JDC social service agency in Kiev, where she escorted our group and shed tears with us at the memorial service we conducted at Babi Yar.

Hesed, as in deeds of mercy, of lovingkindness is the name of an elaborate program that provides care for elderly Jews scattered throughout the FSU. We visited a few of the individuals who receive assistance. Along with two colleagues I climbed 6 flights of steps to the top floor to visit a woman confined to a bed. The government provides some minimal assistance, to this woman, Ninel Dreizina. Her son and daughter both died tragically, and her husband left her. She is truly alone -- but she is not alone and is not abandoned. Due to the amazing work of Hesed, she receives 12 hours of home care, extra funds for medical expenses, and a food card to supplement the little she has to live on. Altogether, the rabbis in our group visited about 20 different locations of Jews who are helped by the Joint. In many cases what they receive is a lifeline, keeping them alive.

Even one who knows the Jewish commandment to care for others could be forgiven if you were to ask, why, why bother, why do we do this?

Our work helps to both sustain Jews and Judaism.

This was illustrated in a story told to us by Asher Ostrin, who directs the Joint’s programs in the FSU. He told us about an elderly gentleman he was visiting, who proudly brandished his Soviet medals. He had little or no connection or interest in anything Jewish. Before leaving the apartment Asher asked the gentleman to tell him about one of his medals. After awhile, he pointed to one, and said somewhat matter of factly, that it was the one he got for participating in the liberation of Auschwitz. A short while later the daughter and granddaughter of this man who has only a minimal, tangential connection to his Jewish roots came in to visit. It turns out
the daughter works for Hesed, and her daughter attends a Jewish nursery school run by the Joint. The granddaughter proudly entered singing a Hebrew children’s song for her grandfather. As Asher explained, we were witnessing “the largest effort to reclaim Jews for the Jewish people on a scale unprecedented in Jewish history.”

One night we played our small part when we fanned out in 10 vans in groups of 3 to teach in 10 different locations throughout Kiev. In the conservative synagogue, along with three other colleagues, I taught over 30 people who came to learn more about Conservative Judaism. In addition to visiting projects of the Joint, such as Hesed, Bayit Ham (A Warm Home) and other programs we went to programs sponsored by the Jewish Agency where the Jewish identity of youth and seniors was being nurtured in classes on Hebrew, Jewish history, and holidays. One center alone serves 10,000 with daily classes and programs.

In this week’s Torah portion, Parashat Terumah presents a detailed description of the items built for Israel’s first sanctuary. It describes cherubim above the ark which are part animal and part human, with wings, yet with faces of children. The Torah says: "The wings extend upward and their faces are toward each other." From this my colleague, Rabbi Steve Lindeman notes, *Itturey Torah* teaches that there is a reason for this juxtaposition. As we strive to reach upward toward God, we should never lose sight of our fellow human beings, for when we come face to face with each other, see and help one another, we are drawn upward towards God.

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