

# A Letter from Rabbi Cooper from Amsterdam

February 18, 2014

Dear Friends,

Despite the fact that we often pass over Europe on the way to Israel, Lori and I have never been able to stop along the way. Since the opportunity for a visit to Amsterdam presented itself (which I will explain in my next letter) we have spent several lovely, full days here. Amsterdam is a city rich in culture, music and art, much of which we have sampled. The Rijksmuseum, which houses the world's most extensive collection of Dutch and Flemish art, coupled with the Van Gogh Museum, create an experience overflowing with beauty, history and greatness. The Portuguese Synagogue (including its Mikveh) and the Jewish Museum are outstanding. If you have not visited Amsterdam previously, you owe yourself a trip and the opportunity to be overwhelmed.

As we planned for this trip during the last few weeks, I found it interesting and heartening that, along with the art museums, among the "must sees" of Amsterdam is the Anne Frank House. It seemed to me a powerful statement that the home where Anne Frank hid during the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam, has become both a site not to be missed and a defining feature of this youthful and fun-loving city. Indeed, upon our arrival for our visit, I found it a powerful and emotional experience to stand in the small dark rooms where Anne and her family hid for two years (1942-1944) before they were discovered by the Nazis. At the same time, however, our visit to the Anne Frank house left me wondering if this story had really made a difference to this society in which those events had occurred.

Prior to our walk through the Frank apartment, we had signed up for a 30-minute introductory presentation led by one of the docents. Our docent, a pleasant young man, explained how prior to the Nazi occupation, Otto Frank, Anne's father, had arranged for his family to hide from the Nazis in a secret apartment connected to the annex of Otto Frank's factory. When the occupation occurred, however, the Franks were among those who were not immediately deported. Our docent told the moving story of how the Frank family hid in total silence for two years and how, after their discovery, Anne and her family, with the exception of her father, perished at Bergen-Belsen. And this story, our docent informed us, was one which all Amsterdam citizens knew. Millions have seen this exhibit and museum and, he told us, that this museum and the programs which emerged from it, taken throughout Europe, confirm the great success of this museum.

At the end of his presentation, he asked for questions. My question was: Given the fact that anti-Semitism in Europe has reached levels today equal to those at the time of the Nazi's rise to power, in which ways does he think that this exhibit and museum have been successful? After a moment of thought, the docent began by saying that I had asked a good question, one he had not encountered before. At the same time, I sensed that something was seriously wrong. After all, how is it possible that a question relating this story to the current situation in Europe not be asked?! His response added to my distress.

He said that it is true that anti-Semitism is on the rise, but those figures are skewed. He smiled with discomfort and continued: "Well, you know that there has been a large influx of Muslims into Europe. They are the ones reflected in those statistics." I was stunned. One of the most basic messages which must be gleaned from Naziism is the danger and damage which comes from labeling a group, stereotyping a people as if they are all the same, as if they are of one mind, was to do to Muslims as had been done to Jews. Moreover, the comment seemed to suggest that in Amsterdam/Europe, there is "us" and "them." There are real Amsterdamians and then there are the foreigners. Sound familiar?

At the end of the tour, a multimedia presentation provides the "modern day" messages of the Anne Frank story and attempts to engage the viewers in discussions of ways in which similar conflicts could arise today:

1. Freedom of speech/expression: Is it right for Europe to deem Nazi clothing, boots or salutes as illegal?
2. Is it proper to outlaw the outward expression of one's religion by wearing a burka or some of other religiously-mandated garb?

Certainly one may derive these challenges from Naziism but, I would suggest, these are not the questions which come from the story of Anne Frank. The Anne Frank story is rooted in anti-Semitism. It is rooted in that age-old prejudice against the Jews. Believe it or not, this point was nowhere mentioned or heard (at least, I didn't hear it and, I promise you, I was listening intently).

I left the Anne Frank House moved by the place and deeply disturbed by the message that has been conveyed to millions of visitors. I am pained by the notion that, despite the museums self-proclaimed success, it has failed to focus on the central story of Naziism and the Holocaust which was, simply put, how the irrational hatred of the Jews was so deeply ingrained that it resulted in the extermination of six million. That message was neglected.

As Lori and I departed, the line to enter had grown substantially. Hundreds of interested and curious visitors were there, waiting to be moved, taught and inspired. I wanted to tell them that the message they would learn was deeply flawed, that the museum that sought to teach a lesson from that place had, itself, misunderstood the message. I wanted to tell those in line to realize that the hatred of Jews exists in Europe today at the same levels it did before the Nazis came to power, but Lori convinced me to leave. I couldn't save the world today, especially while on a short vacation, but even on vacation, I can worry.

Shalom from Amsterdam,  
Neil S. Cooper  
Rabbi