

THE SPIRIT OF Breslau REBORN

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והנשארים בכם והבאתי מרץ בלבבם בארצת
איביהם ורדף אתם קול עלה נדף ונסו מנסת
חרב ונפלו ואין רדף (ויקרא כו. לו)

It was our good colleague, Gesa Ederberg, who convinced us to come to Germany for the RA's European conference. After all, this year marks the 150th anniversary of Breslau's Juedisch-Theologisches Seminar, founded by Rabbi Zecharias Frankel in 1854. How could we not pay homage to that great institution? It was our beginning. Of course, the Breslau seminary is no more. Breslau is no longer in Germany, but in Poland. And the name Breslau itself has been abandoned for a Polish name: Wroclaw.

And so it was that wherever we went in Germany, there was a sense of absence. We visited the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Liebeskind, the very same architect whose design of a new World Trade Center will some day fill the void in lower Manhattan. But in Berlin, Liebeskind's goal was not to fill a void, but to immortalize it. Liebeskind's museum is at once a tribute to what was and a memorial of what no longer is. There are vast empty spaces in the museum which in some way captivate the presence of the absence, that is, the absence of German Jews.

In one room called the Memory Void, naked cement walls rise some three or four stories high. It is empty space. Once inside, one cannot help but ponder the emptiness, the cold, and the silence. On the floor of one section of the Memory Void are some ten thousand iron pucks, with faces akin to the famous

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face in Edvard Munch's "The Scream." The public is invited to walk on the faces. Some did. I could not. The sound of iron striking iron made loud, sharp, clicking noises. It was a frightening sound.

I was asked to speak at a dinner that the German Jewish community held for the visiting Masorti rabbis. I asked the gathering a question: How could they maintain faith in God, how could they even so much as recite the שמע, knowing everything that had gone on in their country? And one woman answered. She told us all that she had faith in Deutschland, that this was a country devoted to democracy and freedom; that this country had done its best to come to grips with its past; and that her country was one that had given her tremendous opportunities. She could therefore remain within Germany, unafraid.

It was then that it all came together for me. The sound of the iron pucks clicking on each other in Liebeskind's Memory Void was the sound of the driven leaf. In fact, the memorial is named with the Hebrew word שלכת – fallen leaves. The public is invited to walk on the leaves, to hear the noise, and to ponder the sounds. But how will we respond? Must we live in fear our entire lives? The Nazis are dead, the death camps are museums, the trains get you to work and back home, and the showers work. To be afraid when no one pursues is a curse of extraordinary measure. It is the duty of every Jew to live free of fear and free of apprehension; to recognize the sound of the driven leaf as that, and no more.

And so it is in Germany that there was also a sense of presence. There are over one million Jews in Europe today, 200,000 in Germany alone. Masorti rabbis from England, France, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Hungary, and, of course, Germany, gathered at our conference. What a job they are doing! The European region of the RA is among the most exciting regions we have. They are teaching Jews to live unafraid. Our colleagues in Europe are reaching out to

Jews with our unique approach to Judaism, one that embraces tradition while affirming modernity. Breslau is no more and yet, clearly, it lives.

As for our good colleagues in Germany – Bea Wylter and David Polnauer who previously worked there, and Gesa Ederberg and Michael Kogan who presently work there—כל הכבוד! These rabbis are living testimony to כל ישראל ערבין זה בזה. We dare not ignore the Jews or Europe and particularly, Germany, certainly not for fear of a קול עלה נדף.

INTERFAITH INITIATIVES

As colleagues know, the RA is a participating organization of IJCIC, the International Jewish Committee on Interfaith Consultation, along with the other religious streams and several major communal organizations. IJCIC has long been the primary dialogue partner with the Vatican and other international faith leaderships.

Pope Benedict XVI invited IJCIC to a meeting at the Vatican on June 9. The Jewish delegation consisting of representatives of IJCIC organizations involved Joel Meyers and Jerome Epstein from our movement. During the meeting, Pope Benedict spoke about the achievements in Catholic-Jewish relations and understandings which have occurred since Vatican II. He made mention of the need to recall history, spoke of the Holocaust and condemned all aspects of anti-Semitism. The Pope's words were warm, reflective and expressed a desire to deepen the bond between Judaism and the Catholic Church. Israel Singer and Joel Meyers, current co-chairmen of IJCIC responded to the Pope's remarks in kind and spoke of IJCIC's commitment to continue to cooperate with the Church in the development of joint efforts to promote projects of גמילות חסד. Planning is underway for the next major Catholic-Jewish consultation.