

PARSHIYOT AHARE
MOT-KEDOSHIM
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Almost forty of us have just returned from a meaningful and emotional trip. We were members of a contingent of some 13,000 Jews, mostly teenagers, from six continents who spent time in Poland and Israel. While the groups had different itineraries, we all walked from Auschwitz to Birkenau on Yom Hashoah and commemorated it in Birkenau with a major ceremony which included the President of the State of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, and the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda. To be in Auschwitz and Birkenau on Yom Hashoah, to listen to the El Maleh Rahamim, to recite the mourner's Kaddish, was a most meaningful moment. Exactly a week later we took another march. This time it was Yom HaAtzma'ut in Israel. We marched from City Hall to the Kotel. Israeli flags flew in the wind on both marches, the Israeli National Anthem, Hatikva, was sung in both places, and yet, as you can well imagine, the mood was very different from one week to the next. That first Thursday we remembered the 6 million of our brothers and sisters who were killed in the Shoah, including 3 million Polish Jews. On the second Thursday we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel commemorating a modern miracle.

This is the trip that we just took – from destruction to redemption, from mourning to celebration. We were witnesses to the almost total annihilation of European Jewry and the thriving and vibrant state of the Jewish people. As you can imagine, we had many different emotions as we relived modern Jewish history. We visited Warsaw, Lublin, Krakow and Lodz. We stood in the area of the ghetto in Warsaw which was totally destroyed, and the ghetto in Krakow that still bears Jewish symbols and houses a number of synagogues. We listened to the stories of the Jews of Lublin and Lodz and how the communities were almost totally destroyed. We stood at the transit points in Warsaw and Lodz, the Umschlagplatz in Warsaw and Radagas in Lodz. From there Jews, having been rounded up from the ghetto, were sent to the concentration camps, the labor camps, and the death camps. We spent a wonderful Shabbat in Krakow with Jews from all over the world and on Shabbat morning in a packed synagogue we were treated to the singing of the Chief Hazzan of the Israeli Defense Forces and his IDF choir as he led us in Tefillah, including a most moving rendition of the prayer for the State of Israel. We heard the stories of members of our group, of their parents who lived through the horrors of the Shoah and survived, and of those of their families who didn't. We recited memorial prayers and the Mourner's Kaddish at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, and Majdanek.

Each of us has taken away many lessons from the trip. As time goes on and as we process what we have been through those lessons will become even more significant. Members of our group will have the opportunity to share their stories with you after Kiddush.

I wish to share a report of some moments that I spent apart from the group. The American Zionist Movement together with the United Nations Mission of the State of Israel headed by Ambassador Danny Danon put together a trip for UN Ambassadors.

They were invited to “The March of the Living” to walk with us in Poland and to parade with us in Jerusalem. Twelve ambassadors were with us on the Poland march and 20 more in Israel. In Poland, after the March on Yom Hashoah I was invited to a dinner to meet with the Ambassadors. I happened to sit next to the head of the UN Mission from Serbia. In my discussions with her I learned that this was her first visit to Auschwitz/Birkenau and she was looking forward to her first visit to Israel. We all know that seeing is not the same as hearing. Growing up after the war she had only heard stories about Auschwitz. She told me that standing at the death chambers and the crematorium was a very moving experience. While there was a reception in Israel for these Ambassadors, I was not able to make it since I was with our group. I would have liked to have known her impression after her visit to Israel.

At the dinner in Krakow the Ambassador from Malta, the Honorable Carmelo Inguanez, spoke for those who had marched in memory of those who were killed at Auschwitz/Birkenau. He said he had learned lessons on that day that he wanted to share with everyone. I will now share them with you.

The first lesson learned was there was a time for condemnation. Man’s humanity to his fellow, prejudice, bias, hatred for another must be condemned. Looking back at history we today know that if the world had acted earlier the Shoah itself may have been prevented. Today we know that most countries around the world, including the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, which closed the door to Palestine, refused to accept refugees from Europe. If they had opened them many Jews could have been saved. He told his fellow ambassadors that is the role of the United Nations to condemn all hatred and to stand up for the rights of all human beings.

The second lesson he learned is that we should always have hope and possess an optimistic attitude. Having seen the worst of human behavior it is possible to despair. Yet, we are taught in the Talmud concerning the destruction of the Second Temple, “Not to mourn is impossible, but to mourn overmuch is also impossible.” It is an amazing story of the strength of the human will that the survivors went on with life, after having experienced the worst in human behavior. Many of them who were saved from the camps were walking skeletons, yet, they began to build their lives anew, many of them bringing new children into the world.

On our visit to Israel to Kfar Maimon, a Moshav in the southern part of Israel, we heard the story of a Holocaust survivor and had lunch catered by his wife. He recounted for us his personal history, how he was able to survive during the Shoah acknowledging the many miracles along the way. He was fortunate that some of his family survived, though many of his extended family were killed. He concluded his story by telling us that he eventually came to Israel and started a family. Today he has children, grandchildren, and greatgrandchildren. They number approximately 70. This, he said, was an answer to Hitler and his plan to annihilate the Jewish people. The State of Israel and its citizens were a response to the Final Solution. The Ambassador from Malta told us that we must always have hope, that we cannot live in despair.

The third lesson is that we always must display caution. Human beings, for better and worse are only human beings, It is possible that events like the Shoah can occur once more. We have seen this happen in Syria, we have heard of the massacres in Africa, Asia, and in different places around the world. Today, anti-Semitism, once more, has reared its angry head in Europe and a Holocaust survivor, only a short while ago, was viciously killed in an anti-Semitic attack. He warned us that you cannot be serene and naïve, that we must ever be cautious. It was a good warning to the UN member states and those who serve in the General Assembly and in the Security Council.

On Memorial Day in Israel, the day they recalled over 23,000 soldiers who were killed in battle or murdered in terror actions, we stood at a paratrooper memorial just outside Sederot. In our sight lines, without binoculars, we could see the trenches and the fences that separate Gaza from the State of Israel, and in the haze we could see the major cities of the Gaza Strip. While Israel today has peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt and better relations with the Gulf states, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza continue their actions which threaten the population of the State of Israel. They are not interested in returning to the 1967 borders. They have made it clear that they want all of Palestine, all of Israel, as it was before the Partition Agreement in 1947. As we stood there we understood that we had a role to play in the security of our brothers and sisters in our ancient homeland once more reborn.

These were the messages from the Ambassador of Malta to his colleagues. I think they can also serve as important lessons for us as well. Take nothing for granted. Seventy years ago Jews of Europe were shipped to gas chambers and concentration camps. Jews who heard of it then did not believe it. Nations of the world did not react to what was happening. One of the guests of “The March of the Living” was Ambassador Ron Dermer, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States. On one of the evenings in Poland he addressed our group. This was his first trip to Poland and he said that he had to process everything he had seen, but he had already learned some lessons. The major one was that when the Jewish people are powerless, a catastrophe can occur. The fact that we have power, even with all of its challenges, allows us to survive today not only as a Jewish state, but as a Jewish people. One can only surmise how many Jews might have been saved if there had been a State of Israel during the Second World War. This was the lesson he took from his trip to Poland.

All of us present on these emotional days have our own thoughts. As we return we bring with us remarkable memories shared in Poland and in Israel which we will continue to process. We were told a number of times that of Elie Wiesel stated, “When you listen to a witness, you become a witness.”

This morning we read the Torah portions of Ahare Mot-Kedoshim. The portion of Ahare Mot begins after the death of the two sons of Aaron. We stood Ahare Mot, after the death of three million Polish Jews in the places in which they lived and in the places in which they died. The second Torah portion reminds us that we are to be holy as our G-d is holy. It stresses the importance of moral, ethical, and just behavior. In Poland we remembered the Kedoshim, the martyrs of our people, and we challenged ourselves there

and in Israel to live by the dictates of our Torah and uphold a sense of morality and ethical behavior in a world that desperately needs it.

As we become witnesses, whether we are the children of survivors or not, as we take these lessons to heart, as we share them with you and with members of our larger community, we live up to our high standards of our tradition to ensure the two mottos of our people that were stated in Poland and in Israel. In Poland we said, "Never Again," and in Israel we said, "Am Yisrael Chai," the people of Israel live. May both statements motivate all of us today, tomorrow, and well into the future.