

FORWARD

March of Living Must Embrace Life

Tad Taube | Fri. May 05, 2006

Each year in April, thousands of Jewish youngsters from Israel and the Diaspora make a pilgrimage to the sites of the Nazi death camps in Poland, to commemorate the millions murdered, to remember and never to forget. The March of the Living has become one of the most important international Jewish events, a practical implementation of Emil Fackenheim's 614th commandment: not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory.

Surely, world Jewry would be greatly deficient in its fundamental obligations, both to the dead and to the living, were it not to make it possible for today's youth to personally confront the sites of the ultimate horror.

Yet as young Jews march in pain and sorrow through Auschwitz and Birkenau, Treblinka and Majdanek, they are shown but a glimpse of the glorious 900 years of the history of Polish Jewry. Only occasionally do they learn at all that Jewish history did not end there with the Shoah.

Of course, it would be difficult to include everything in one short and emotionally charged stay; however, the program should not be entirely focused on the victims. And when nine centuries of life are reduced to but five years of death, the impressions that emerge will be unavoidably distorted.

The memory of those who were murdered by the Nazis in Poland would not be demeaned, but exalted even more, by commemorating the spectacular achievements of Polish Jews, who made up half of the victims of the Shoah. And the legitimate focus on Israel — which, after the Shoah, has become a vital center of Jewish life worldwide — would not suffer on learning how Jews who chose to remain or return to Poland were able to rebuild their lives under an oppressive regime. If the Shoah teaches us anything, it is that all Jews alike — religious and secular, Zionist and diasporic, the living and the dead — have equal claim to our solidarity, support and respect.

This is not only a question of setting the historical and moral record straight. Should the march emphasize that Auschwitz is the only fact about the Polish Diaspora — indeed, any Diaspora — that matters, as it is the ineluctable ending of all diasporic efforts? What should be to us more important: our accomplishments, or Hitler's? And is it irrelevant that hundreds of thousands of non-Jews also perished in the same camps, at the hands of the same obscene Nazi regime?

What of the thousands of women, most of them Polish, who tried to save their Jewish brethren — what of the more than 800 in Poland alone who were killed by the Nazis for this? The fundamental message of the March of the Living — come to Poland to see death, and then come to Israel to see resurrection — offers no answers to these questions, and yet these realities can hardly be considered just footnotes to history.

The march presses on its message with almost a religious fervor. Yet there is already a religion based on the narrative of death and resurrection — but the last time I looked, this was not our religion.

The March of the Living — an event of breathtaking complexity, and daunting political and logistic challenges — is beginning to try to address these issues. Fifteen years ago the march made no mention of the Polish Jewish past, and banned participants from having contacts with people living in Poland today, be they Poles or Jews, let alone allowing them to participate.

For the last few years, however, the program has tried to include a brief tour of Polish Jewish historical sights, and not only Polish Jews, but also non-Jewish Poles, are welcome to take part in the march. This last development, in particular, is significant, for it is a form of acknowledging the impressive efforts made by a segment of Polish society, and especially its youth, to preserve and cherish the Polish Jewish heritage.

Mercifully, the orientation materials march participants receive no longer includes statements such as: “You shall see the local inhabitants. You shall hate them for their part in the atrocities, but pity them for their miserable living conditions.” But these developments, though welcome, are not entirely sufficient.

Remembering the glory of what was Polish Jewry does not detract, but adds to the commemoration of the victims — which should remain a central point of the March of the Living. So, too, does praising the efforts of the survivors, the Poles and the growing number of overseas supporters of Jewish renaissance in Poland who strive to rebuild a vibrant Jewish community once again.

Poles support this rebirth in increasing numbers by extending a hand in friendship and by a new vision of seeing Jews not as the bogeymen of antisemitic myth, but their brethren and compatriots. In the same vein, advancing the centrality of Israel should not mean casting aspersion on those who choose to live in the Diaspora — be it in Poland, Germany or, for that matter, North America. Finally, attempts to build a Jewish identity mainly around the Shoah — and the March of the Living has been criticized justly for this — cannot succeed, nor should it. Judaism is much richer than that.

The implied emotional bind of the March of the Living — “be Jewish, for had you been Jewish then, they would have killed you” — is hardly worthy of a great civilization. There are many better reasons to be Jewish. We are, as the name of the march itself implies, a civilization of life, not death.

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