



## *Stumbling Stones*

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Last Shabbat, I was at a bar mitzvah in Berlin. On the top floor of a synagogue that had been destroyed during the Nazi years and in recent years painstakingly reconstructed to serve as a museum to what Jewish life had been like in pre-Nazi Germany, a bit hidden, is a newly thriving Conservative synagogue. As we sat, looking out over the broken arch in the outdoor courtyard marking where the *bimah* of this once great synagogue had stood, children ran up and down the aisles laughing and the congregation joyously joined the Hazzan in uplifting melodies.

This was the bar mitzvah of the grandson of Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the retired Chancellor of the Jewish Theological seminary, and he was the guest speaker for the morning. He began his words with a story.

On July 11, 1944, he shared, his grandfather succumbed to starvation at a concentration camp not far from where we stood. Now, he marveled, on July 16, 2016, his grandson stood in a free Berlin to be called to the Torah. He spoke about the miracle of that moment. From his grandfather to his grandson, a new world.

How did that happen? In the span of less than 80 years, how did Germany go from committing the most horrifying atrocities against the Jewish people, to becoming a haven for Jews from around the world – including nearly 30,000 Israelis in Berlin alone?

That was the question that hung over us at every place we visited and with every person we met as I joined a group of 12 rabbis from Boston. All around us were signs of a nation that has not only repented, but has done so by putting front and center at the core of its national discourse the obligation to grapple with the past in order to build a brighter future.

All over are monuments to Germany's dark history. In the Eastern part of Berlin stands a series of sculptures marking a rebellion by non-Jewish wives of Jewish men who had been rounded up by the Nazis. They stood in the square refusing to leave until the Nazis remarkably released their husbands and sent them home. It is one of the few Holocaust stories with a happy ending.

Directly in front of one of Germany's major universities, in the main courtyard of the campus, there is a glass covered opening in the ground under which is a vast room filled with nothing but empty book cases, a vivid reminder every day, as Rabbi Schorsch said, of Heinrich Heine's warning, "Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people."

In a beautiful park with bikers and families out enjoying the gorgeous day, we noticed many stopping for a few moments at a memorial for the Roma Gypsies who were also victims at Hitler's hands. We, too, stepped into the plaza to pay our respects. As we left, I heard a little girl in a stroller call out to her parents, "Was ist das?" "What is this?" They looked unsure of what to say, and she asked again, "Was ist das?"

How does a parent answer that question? How do you explain the Holocaust to a 4-year-old? In Germany, that is a daily task. And it seemed to us, in civil society, it has become a matter of civic duty to ask and answer that question regularly and repeatedly.

How one answers, though, is a matter of debate. It turns out that between the two cities we visited, Munich and Berlin, there is an active argument.

Berlin, as in much of Germany, has one of the most concrete manifestations of memory: shiny brass engraved plates embedded in the cobblestone sidewalks. These stones, called Stolpersteine, or stumbling stones, recount the names, birthdays, dates of deportation or information about internment at a concentration camp, and death of the Jews who had once walked those very streets.

They usually begin, “Here lived...” with the name of one person. The word used for their passing is not “died” but “murdered,” making a clear statement of the evil perpetrated. There is no whitewashing on a stumbling stone; it is a vivid encounter with history with every step.

Amazingly, we learned that stumbling stones are not placed just by relatives of the deceased. In fact, in not just Berlin but cities all over Europe, you can work with the Stolpersteine organization to research who once lived in the building you now inhabit and learn about their lives.

The stumbling stones embody a reality we encountered again and again on our journey through Germany: Memory as an active force. The past laid upon the present. People of today mingling with the memory of those from a bygone world eviscerated by hate.

If you live in Munich, though, there are no public stumbling stones. There, surprisingly, the head of the Jewish community opposes them. Our group of rabbis was given a front row seat to that debate.

The very first thing a representative from the Munich Jewish community wanted to tell us, emphatically, is how bad the stumbling stones are. They are disrespectful, she said. How can you put the names of Jews on the ground where people will trample over them? Where they will get dusty? Where they could be vandalized? Unseemly. Worse, she said, with so many separate monuments, the memories become cheapened. When memory is everywhere, she argued, it can be nowhere.

Personally, I was profoundly moved by the stumbling stones as part of the ethic Germany has long carefully cultivated that has enabled, in the span of less than 80 years, what could never have been imagined by Rabbi Schorsch’s grandfather to be the regular reality of his grandson – a thriving Jewish life in Germany.

And the argument itself, in an ironic way, seemed to me a case in point of that very thriving Jewish life. After all, when you feel secure enough to argue, you know you are home.

I left Munich convinced that their resistance to these stumbling stones was a mistake, and I remain convinced of that. That said, on a visit to a local school in Berlin, the students shared with us that Holocaust education is so pervasive and persistent in their curriculum as to become background noise. One young teacher shared how difficult it is to reach her students because of the saturation of stories. “When you start to teach,” she said, “they are already bored. They feel they’ve heard it all before.” If everywhere you look is a reminder of a shameful and terrifying past, she explained, there is a natural instinct to react, “Sure that happened, but it doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

A school that we visited tackled this problem by making the Stolpersteine come to life. In a part of town that once was a Jewish neighborhood but for many years had no Jews, each sixth grader is assigned a project to research a Holocaust victim who came from their neighborhood or even lived in their building. At the end of the year, each student presents his or her study and then places a brick on a wall of names the school has built. It now stands at least ten feet wide and five feet high. It is far from complete. There are still countless more people they have not profiled.

The wall they are building is not meant to keep people out but rather to let the memory of those who died remind them to let others in. With each project, each brick, a new sense of what it means to be a neighbor is imprinted on the students and the community at large.

Perhaps the most sobering part of the visit to Germany for me was captured in that neighborhood. We met compassionate people just like us, and yet somehow, their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents in that very place had been complicit in the Holocaust.

All around, I was struck by a sense of how quickly a modern, beautiful, culturally sophisticated, wealthy nation can turn against their neighbors. How no monument, not the

stumbling stones as poignant as they may be, or the many, many large memorials we saw, can ever be enough.

The Berlin school is a vivid testimony that morality is fragile, and that to create a community of honor requires constant vigilance in the never-ending struggle against hatred and the horror that can lie in the human soul.

That fragility became a disconcerting accompaniment to my entire time there. I found myself thinking again and again not of German society, which has done more than any other country in the world to try to learn from its past and keep those lessons alive and central today, but of our own society here in America.

As I watched the news from afar of the explosion of racism our country has seen, of the law-and-order nationalism that is whipping people into a frenzy, of the xenophobia, outright hatred, and isolationism we have heard recently, I could not help but wonder if we in America should be crafting stumbling stones of our own.

Once, in Germany, neighbor turned against neighbor. Not just sociopaths or mentally ill people, but normal, average people bought into an ideology of hate, fueled by blaming others for the challenges the nation faced. No job? Blame the Jews. Worried about your children's future? Keep the Gypsies out.

Ordinary people swallowed their own distaste for Hitler's rhetoric and fell into line behind him. Ordinary people allowed themselves to be swayed by a narrative of an embattled nation, by fear of the "other," and checked their moral compasses at the door.

If anything, the constant and visible signs of memory in Germany left me with a sense of disquiet not about then, but about now. If the past has anything to teach us, if Germany has anything to teach us, it is a terrifying caution for America today. We have seen what the ideology of blame, hatred, and xenophobia brings. We have seen how easy it is for a nation to

fall under that sway. We have seen the fragility of democracy. Remember that Hitler was elected to power.

At the same time, we can see in today's Germany a nation working every day to come up with new ways to confront its history of hatred, literally lining its streets with memory. It has become a country using the power of memory to mold a better future.

In America we take for granted that nothing like what happened in Germany could happen here. But there is an underlying fragility to our system too.

We have a beautiful legacy of openness, acceptance and freedom here in America, but that does not make us immune to hatred and xenophobia.

Can we find ways to create our own metaphorical stumbling stones to remind us daily to take seriously the lessons the world has learned from Germany of the 1930s and 1940s of how terrifyingly easy it is to slip into a society that perpetrates the worst kind of evil in the name of security and prosperity? Those who remember and recommit themselves every day to learning from the sins of the past have a chance to choose a better way. The very real question for us today is, what kind of nation do we want to be?

My friend, Rabbi Neal Loevinger, wrote this week about the problematic lesson the Torah appears to leave us with at the end of this week's *parasha*. Pinchas's zealotry, hatred and violence appear to be not only approved of but rewarded by God.

But our tradition does not end there. In our *Haftarah*, he points out, the rabbis bring a counter-voice, a voice that has the final word. And that is that an honorable society can never be built out of hatred and harm; it can only be built, the prophet Micha teaches, by those who "do justice, love loving-kindness, and walk humbly with God." For us in America today, may we do no less.