

The Forgotten Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe

Last summer I had the privilege of accompanying a bus load of American teenagers on a trip to Eastern Europe and Israel. As part of the NFTY's "L'Dor v'Dor" trip, we visited sites that explored the richness of European Jewish heritage and then explored the modern State of Israel. I was excited to staff this trip as I had minimal experience visiting Eastern Europe. I was looking forward to learning about the history of these Jewish communities.

After a week in Eastern Europe, I was ready to go to Israel. It seemed as if every Jewish site we visited somehow was related to the Holocaust. Our Eastern European experience culminated in our trip to Aushwitz-Birkenau. I was worn out. The teenagers were worn out. As we left Auschwitz, they could not help but lighten up the conversations. They were tired of listening to stories of Jewish destruction.

As I listened to these teenagers, I thought to myself, aren't there Jews still living in this part of the world? Doesn't Warsaw have a prospering Reform Jewish community? Why can't we give ourselves a small sense of hope of Jewish vitality by exposing our participants to these communities?

Jonathan Krasner writes, "Ultimately, Israel served a two-fold purpose in the school curriculum, as it did in American Jews' civil religion: it was 'a symbol and a source of renewed Jewish vitality' and a focus for the preoccupation with survival."¹ Although Krasner was speaking about Jewish education around the time of the Six-Day War, his analysis seems to ring true today. The following is a description of the trip,

¹ Jonathan Krasner, "Jewish Education and American Jewish Education," Part II. *Journal of Jewish Education* (Network for Research in Jewish Education), Volume 72, Number 1, 2005, p. 100.

Experience for yourself the epic story of the journey of the Jewish people. Together with NFTY friends from across North America, begin your adventure in Europe, exploring more than 1000 years of our rich European Jewish heritage. Truly appreciate the beautiful community and culture our ancestors created and its virtual destruction during the Shoah—Holocaust. With the Czech Republic and Poland as an introduction, you'll arrive in Israel with an intimate understanding of the importance of Eretz Yisrael – the Land of Israel in our time, ready to enjoy four wonderful weeks discovering your personal connection to our people and our history.²

The “L’Dor v’Dor” trip is about showing our teenagers the communities that were *destroyed* in the Holocaust, which resulted in the creation of the State of Israel. Is this the only way we can teach about the Holocaust and Israel, “They tried to kill us; they won, so we built our own state”? No. We can educate our teens about the destruction, about the need for a Jewish State given the plight of the Jews *and* about how Jews have persevered.

In December, two dozen Reform rabbis visited Progressive Jewish communities in the Czech Republic and Poland. One of the rabbis shared an anecdote about his wife, who is a Jewish educator. She was skeptical about the trip because she was not aware of the existence of these communities. The couple did not see these Jews in their previous visits to Prague, so she thought that they did not exist.³ It appears that even Jewish professionals do not seem to be aware that these communities exist.

Consequently, the purpose of this trip was to expose American Reform rabbis to the Progressive Congregations in Eastern Europe, many of which are thriving. The World Union of Progressive Judaism’s leaders hoped that upon their return, these rabbis would spread the word to their colleagues and to their congregants. These rabbis could

² <http://www.nftyisrael.org/programs/ldorvdor/itinerary/>

³ <http://www.jta.org/cgi-bin/iowa/news/print/20071114reformjewseurope.html>

bring their congregations to visit these burgeoning communities and build relationships with them. Many of our teenagers are already visiting Eastern Europe as part of their Israel experience. Perhaps we can educate them about the rebirth of Judaism in Eastern Europe by adding visits to these communities to the itinerary. Not only will they learn about the destruction that took place during the Holocaust, they will also learn how Eastern European Jewish communities are recovering from this devastation.

Teenagers are able to think in more sophisticated ways about the Holocaust and its relationship to Israel. It is important for them to sense the vast destruction that took place during WWII. It is important for them to learn about the Jewish heritage that developed and is now lost. However, it is also important for them to know that Jews in Eastern Europe are trying to rebuild their communities. American Jews have 350 years of experience of building communities in new places. By building connections with our brethren in Eastern Europe, we can help them rebuild and reclaim their traditions.

By focusing on the destruction of the Eastern European Jewish community, we limit our teenagers' awareness of the worldwide Jewish community. We give them a simplistic picture of Jewish history. It is time that we opened up their eyes and our own to the richness of the Jewish communities around the world. We do not have to show ourselves what Judaism *was* like in Eastern Europe by visiting museums. Rather, we can show ourselves what Judaism *is* like in Eastern Europe by visiting the Jewish sites that are alive and waiting for our visits. However, first, we need to convince ourselves that this task is important.