

Rabbi Bloom's Erev Yom Kippur Sermon **October 8, 2019**

The second half of my sabbatical presented a unique opportunity to visit Poland with my dear and cherished friend Ken who flew out from California to join me. We arrived in the city of Warsaw. We toured the traditional places that Jewish people visit. Remember that Warsaw had 350,000 Jews at the outset of World War II. We toured the remains of the infamous Jewish ghetto that the Nazis created. We visited the surviving synagogues which are undergoing renovation in both physical and spiritual terms. The Jewish museum in Warsaw tells the story of Polish Jewry from the 10th century through the Nazis and covers Polish Jewry in the aftermath of the Holocaust too.

My friend Ken had a specific agenda for joining me on this trip. His parents both grew up in Vienna. His father and grandfather were both arrested as a result of Kristallnacht. His father was imprisoned in Dachau and six months later was released. They all made it to America. His mother's parents weren't that fortunate. While she was able to get to America at age 15, her parents were deported to Poland. Based upon the stories his mother told him and the letters his grandparents wrote from the ghetto from where they were deported - he was always told by his mother, they were sent to Auschwitz concentration camp. His mission was to visit the Polish town of Kielce where his grandparents were deported. It is a town in the southwest part of Poland. It is a city of about 200,000.

At the outset Ken thought we would just drive by and see if we could find the address that the grandparents used to write his mother those letters which were passed down to him after her death. It seemed simple enough and not a big deal. Just a drive by kind of experience.

We arrived in Kielce. In the area designated as the Jewish ghetto, we found a monument of a partial menorah as if it had been broken protruding out of the ground and a plaque next to it dedicated to the Jews who were deported there. The plaque read '28,000 Jews from Austria were deported to Kielce. Many died from diseases in the ghetto and others were simply shot or starved to death. The rest were deported to Treblinka concentration camp.' I will never forget how he reacted to the actual facts about what happened to his grandparents. I will never forget the outpouring of emotion, pain and sorrow that flowed from his heart. We even found the actual address and the building that was written on all the letters that were sent to Ken's mother in America.

We walked around the downtown of Kielce and discovered that it once was an active and thriving Jewish community. We were able to see and identify two synagogues which were locked up today and not in use. When we left, we headed for our next destination to Cracow. Along the way I asked him how he was feeling. Ken replied, "For the first time I was able to imagine them here confined to the ghetto the SS set up. I now know the truth that they may very well have been transported to Treblinka."

We know that the Nazis were able to destroy Treblinka and not leave major evidence of it

as a functioning death camp. Ken added, "I feel as if I got to know my grandparents for the first time because we came to Kielce." For Ken that day in Kielce was a day of reckoning as he faced his past by connecting, spiritually speaking, with his grandparents. Memory is a powerful force with the human spirit. Yom Kippur is a reckoning as well on many different levels. Kol Nidrei, chanted tonight at services, is the one prayer during the high holy days that compels us to remember unfinished business like that which occupied the soul of my good friend.

What I remember most from that experience shadowing him was the transition from profound sadness and hurt to a sort of liberation and a feeling of reclaiming something lost and sacred from them which they bequeathed to him. Finding something which has been lost to us, like a precious heirloom, and reclaiming it or embracing it whether it is an object or a memory points directly to the theme of reconciliation in Judaism. Is there something in this story that resonates for us? Is it a healthy thing to face up to a painful past so that we can find resolution? Don't we have unresolved dilemmas and long buried secrets that sometimes our closest friends and family do not necessarily know about or that we have hidden from them? Ken's story is out of the ordinary and unforgettable but I believe there is a powerful dynamic here of recovering something that is both painful and liberating. Maybe some of us understand what that feels like outside of the context of the Holocaust. Is it possible that we too have other kinds of unresolved issues like Ken? How can we make the choice to go back and face them so that we can start over and feel at peace? Ken made that choice and it worked for him. What about us?

Last spring I saw a foreign film entitled "1945" which tells the story of two traditional Jews who return to their loved one's old Hungarian village right after the war. They accompany a horse and wagon by foot. The townspeople think these mysterious strangers are planning something nefarious and obsess why they are there and what is inside the large crate which is accompanying them. At the end of the movie the two Orthodox Jews, one old and one young, arrive at the local Jewish cemetery. The townspeople are watching them open up the crate that looks just like a casket. What do they do in front of suspicious and hostile villagers watching them? They open it up and pull out their loved one's talit and prayer books. They dig a hole, as if it was his grave, and bury these sacred artifacts that belonged to him in his grave. They return to the train station and leave. The townspeople are bewildered but the two Jews appear to be relieved that they have accomplished their mission which was to restore the dignity of their friend's memory. Once again returning something lost and precious leads to renewal of faith.

What is it about us that we must subject ourselves to this kind of pain? Why do we hold on to these painful memories? It is not just about the Holocaust. This human instinct or is it a Jewish instinct to hold onto something painful for a long time and then one day we face it.

Look at the High Holy Days and Yom Kippur in particular for the answers to this question. We have so many triggers inside the prayers we recite each year which give us the wake up call. We avoid the past and then we get to Kol Nidrei or Yizkor and we are suddenly not in control. Is it the music or the words themselves that awaken something dormant inside us? For some reading the prayers becomes a routine and without emotion. For others reciting a

prayer in just the right the moment becomes a clarion call to seek out a lost object which means a lost truth in us.

Is it a long forgotten memory? Could the lost object represent a new insight? Still with others could that lost object be facing a truth that has been knocking on our door for decades but we refused to open it?

Years ago I remember a person who told me a story once that he discovered long ago as a child that his sibling and he did not share the same father. Yet no one in his immediate or extended family ever talked about it to him as if it was taboo to discuss it. Was it a family secret? Why couldn't he know the truth about his brother's true identity? Who was his biological father? They went on in years and neither the brothers nor the rest of the family ever discussed it. Finally the younger one, as a young adult, confronted his father about the truth and why no one would tell him that truth. That was a difficult truth to face for both father and son not because it was something horrible but because it was simply hidden and never discussed. Both father and son were hurt when the son made his father confront the story. Venting it was critical to their relationship even though it was never discussed again between them. The brothers themselves have never discussed that history. Yet, the younger brother grew up and was better able to understand the dynamics of his relationship with his older brother.

Seeking the truth about who we are and what we have done with our lives is a complicated journey. I believe that my friend Ken learned not only the truth about what happened to his mother's parents but he might have also learned something about himself. His need was to connect with that lost object which in this case was his grandparents. He found something painful but at the same time something precious when he returned that memory to himself. Think about the unfinished stories that remain unresolved in our lives. Remember what it feels like to live with a desire to finish a life story, or to reconcile an old conflict. Doesn't it take an act of faith to force ourselves to face the truth? It really does not matter who is at fault for a hurt. It is about returning something lost or hidden to our present and making peace with it. Sure we can go to the grave with unresolved matters but did we live up to the best and most honest part ourselves if we ignore that truth which calls to us from the depths of our hidden memories?

Yom Kippur is about finding the best and honest part of ourselves not only with God or with people but most importantly within ourselves. Finding something lost about ourselves leads us to a truth that can renew us in so many ways. That is what Teshuvah is all about.