

“FIVE SACRED SPACES”
Part Four
“The Dohany Street Synagogue”

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On a day last summer, while studying drawings and photos of the spectacular Dohany Sheet Synagogue of Budapest, for whatever reason, that famous first line of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* came to mind:

“It was the best of times,
it was the worst of times.”

What could possibly connect these two? A synagogue in Hungary and a novel set in London and Paris? Nothing suffices like a quick visit to Google to provide the answer to such supreme irony. **Both** the synagogue and the novel were completed in 1859. And there's my answer.

This largest European synagogue and the cosmopolitan, prosperous Jews who peopled its 3000 seats were destined to know both the best and the worst of times and at the most personal level.

The seating area of the synagogue rises three stories and is illuminated by enormous chandeliers. The Ark is magnificent, containing twenty five crowned Torah scrolls. High above the Ark are the organ pipes and the choir loft. The Shabbat in 2004 when Andrea and I and our Cantor Joel Colman worshipped in the Dohany Street Synagogue it was far from empty as we were joined by many hundreds of fellow Jews, mostly tourists and all of them amazed at the grandeur of this spectacular synagogue. The walls of the Dohany Street Synagogue are brilliantly colored in Moorish patterns which incorporate Jewish iconography. It's two towers rise high in the air making their mark on an already impressive Budapest skyline.

The mid to late 19th century inspired beautiful residences which were built adjacent to this monumental synagogue. To the left of the main doorway of the synagogue, there was a fashionable apartment house where, only one year after the synagogue's dedication, Theodor Herzl, the father of Political Zionism was born.

Playing with his friends, prior to the family's move to Vienna in 1878, young Theodor could never ever have imagined in his most horrific nightmare what was to transpire in his boyhood neighborhood. Adolph Eichmann supervised the enclosure of the ghetto in 1944. He even had an office in the balcony of the synagogue, where his plans were formulated to efficiently send the Jews of Budapest by train to their annihilation.

The Dohany Street Synagogue's garden became a common grave for 2000 Jews who died of starvation while waiting to be sent on those trains. In the 1960's, actor Tony Curtis who is of Hungarian Jewish parentage, dedicated a magnificent sculpture of a Weeping Willow Tree to memorialize the murder of 365,000 Hungarian Jews.

Herzl, because of his background in an emancipated Hungarian family was fluent in German and French but had forgotten most of the Hebrew he had been taught for his Bar Mitzvah which took place next door. Herzl was a secularist, holding an earned doctorate in the law, a talented playwright, an intellectual, and a journalist assigned by a liberal Hungarian newspaper to cover a sensational show trial that was taking place in Paris.

There he sat, day by day, in utter disbelief as Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army was unjustly accused of treason. History proves that the trial itself was a well-coordinated conspiracy of three parties, the French militarists, the anti-Jewish clerics and political reactionaries. Their goal was to turn back the clock rescinding that progress made by Jews in the French Republic which granted them normal citizen rights.

Herzl saw it all. His long slumbering Jewish soul was at last awakened by the outrage of this trial. By 1896 he published a pamphlet titled *The Jewish State*, which changed the course of modern Jewish history in 86 pages. And here are his six axioms:

- 1) The Jew will never be finally assimilated in Europe.
- 2) Discrimination will only make the Jewish condition worse.
- 3) Political equality in Europe will not defeat anti-Semitism.
- 4) Economic competition between middle class Jews and non-Jewish middle classes will inevitably lead to friction.
- 5) Emigration to another country will merely recreate the same problem elsewhere.
- 6) The solution to the Jewish problem lies in the establishment of a Jewish state and in an organized emigration of Jewry to a territory given to them by Charter where they can have self-government and control their own destiny.

In Basle Switzerland, Herzl convened the First Zionist Conference in 1897. He would live to see seven such conferences before his death in 1904. But after that first Conference in 1897, Herzl allowed himself to optimistically predict:

“Were I to sum up the Basle Congress... it would be this: At Basle I founded the Jewish State . If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, and certainly in fifty, everyone will know it.”

Well, he only missed by **one year**, and six million deaths.

While our Temple Sinai group was in Israel’s Independence Hall last March, we were privileged to take a close look at the original manuscript of The Declaration of the State of Israel. Recognizable in alphabetical order was the name Golda Mabovitch Meyerson, whom the world came to know as Golda Meir. I stared at her signature in Hebrew and English and recalled how in her memoirs, Golda described her bitter memories of the infamous 1938 International Conference on Refugees held in Evian, France.

Golda was an unofficial observer from Palestine not even seated with the delegates of 32 countries whose single agenda item was how many Jewish refugees their governments would accept so as to help them escape the Nazi threat.

In her diary, Golda wrote:

“Sitting in that magnificent hall, listening to the delegates,...rise each in their turn, to explain how much they would have liked to take in substantial numbers of refugees and how unfortunate it was that they were not able to do so, was a terrible experience.
...Of course, I didn't know then that not concentration camps but death camps awaited the refugees whom no one wanted.”

You won't be surprised that tears flowed from our eyes and we were too moved to even speak to one another as we listened to the scratchy recording of Ben Gurion's speech and to the assembled group as they joined in singing Hatikvah accompanied by a full symphony orchestra that had been located one story above because there was no room for them in the chamber.

Now, mind you, that whole room was smaller than the Bema of the great Dohany Street Synagogue. But tragically, it turned out that that grand Temple was built on a wishful myth of Jewish equality, acceptance and safety.

But those 200 souls who on May 14, 1948 packed into that room downtown in Tel Aviv were under no such illusion. They knew full well, and history validates it, the blood and the sacrifice which the realization of **their** dream would and still demands.

I wonder if you remember last May when Pope Benedict XVI arrived in Israel. Upon landing at Ben Gurion Airport, he said in his opening remarks:

“I plead with all of those responsible to explore every possible avenue for a just resolution of the outstanding difficulties...”

Two weeks before the Pope's arrival, one of those individuals to which Benedict's plea was addressed, publicly refused to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Said Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas,

“I do not accept it...It is not my job to give a description of the state. Name yourself the Hebrew Socialist Republic – it is none of my business,...”

Well, Abbas was right of course. He has no role to play as 61 years before, those gathered in Independence Hall, the former home of Meir Dizengof, the first Mayor of Tel Aviv, those Jews, they gave the Jewish state its eternal name: Israel!

Pope Benedict calls for a “Just Resolution” and once again, only four weeks before the Royal Jordanian Airliner brought him to Israel, a Palestinian court sentenced 59 year old Anwar Bargout to death by hanging. You know what this Palestinian’s crime was? He sold a parcel of his own land to Israelis from the Karmeit settlement.

And, by the way, the Pope has a lot to learn about justice, having four months before his landing at Ben Gurion, revoked the excommunication of that outspoken Holocaust denier, British born Bishop Richard Williamson. One can only imagine what Franklin Littell, a Methodist minister and one of the truly righteous theologian scholars who fathered Holocaust Studies in the late 1950’s would have said about the Pope’s revocation of this excommunication.

I had the privilege of studying for one short period with Dr. Littell at, of all places, Brigham Young University in Utah. He was among the very first to courageously pose the question which no one else - Jew or non-Jew - dared to address:

“How could baptized Christians living in the heart of Christian Europe have either killed or ignored the killing of Europe’s Jews?”

His answer? Christianity’s failure was a consequence of 2000 years of systematic contempt for both Jews and Judaism. Pope Benedict ought to have spent some time in Utah with the Reverend Dr. Franklin Littell, Zichrono Livrachah – of blessed memory, who died just a short while ago at age 91.

Here is what I have concluded about Israel, and please hear me clearly...

- 1) I am horrified by the continued building of settlements on the West Bank and believe that they are an impediment to peace:
- 2) I refuse to overlook the sinful behavior of our own Jewish extremists and nutcases such as that gunman who recently shot to death two people at a Tel Aviv Center for gay youth.
- 3) I condemn the chief military rabbi of Israel who has sanctioned pamphlets to be circulated to Israeli soldiers fighting in the Gaza area which incite hate and racist violence against Palestinians and urge the soldiers to “not show concern for a population that surrounds and harms us.”

That said, when Israel stands so alone in a world of shameless hypocrisy, a world which has no memory of the past, then I too must echo the resolve of my Los Angeles colleague, Rabbi Ed Feinstein, who says so eloquently:

“...we will not apologize for taking steps to survive in that vicious corner of the world

where, mesmerized by murder and blood,
they dance and sing when their children
blow themselves up.”

“We will not apologize for demanding our
land and our freedom and our security in this
world.”

Jews no longer apologize for surviving.

Some of you will remember that Golda Meir made a similar vow in her memoirs.
To the question: “To be or not to be?”

“Each nation must make its own reply in its own
way, and Jews neither can nor should ever depend
on anyone else for permission to stay alive.”

Our Torah portion for this holiest day of Yom Kippur is unambivalent in its
admonishment:

...I have set before thee life and death,
the blessing and the curse; therefore choose
life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed...

And, it has been precisely for that, to choose life, that we Jews have struggled in
these Four Sacred Spaces to which we have made pilgrimage thus far.

First to the Synagogue of Ha-Ari in Tsefat, Israel. There, Rabbi Isaac Luria taught
and touched both minds and souls inspired by the Kabbalah, our mystical teachings, to
treasure and embrace those joy and healthy pleasures which life has to offer. Those Jewish
Mystics imbued with a lesson so central to our own day. Until you make peace with **who**
you are, you will never be content with what you have.

And then we witnessed the determined efforts of those steadfast Jews of the 1st
century who were brought to Rome as captive slaves following the destruction of
Jerusalem. Their souls were not captive however, and without hesitation they built their
synagogue in Ostia Antica, complete with its mikvah, its matzah oven and its handsome
Ark of the Covenant. A Sacred Space indeed!

And last night, on Kol Nidre eve, you and I atoned in the same prayers offered by
our brothers and sisters in the Great Synagogue of Rome. They sustained and withstood
the cruelty of the Church intent upon converting them. Every threat to their physical
welfare and that of their precious children, too horrendous to even mention “this day”,
caused them to compromise whatever was necessary in order to choose life. But on Kol
Nidre eve, an evening fraught with danger, many sought to annul their desperate vows and
to whisper in that Third Sacred Place: Shemra Yisrael Adonai Elohyinu Adonai Echad.

And today from Rome to Budapest where with the earnest hope and fervent
optimism of at last becoming **both fully accepted citizens of Hungary and** at the same

time, faithful followers of Judaism, a great Temple was built. In 90 years, all such dreams and hopes were shattered.

Fourteen months after the founding of Israel, a small group was sent on a special mission. Theodor Herzl's remains were flown to Israel from their burial place in Vienna. His grave is reached today by following a pathway under towering pines, cedars and cypress trees. And at the highest point of the new Jerusalem, in solemn simplicity, a square block of black marble is inscribed in Hebrew:

Herzl.

Our journeys to these Four Sacred Spaces have been instructive but they have also been so emotionally draining.

Before this sacred day draws to its close, with the lessons we have learned and the example of the optimism, the courage and the faithfulness of 2000 years, inspiring our hearts, it is time now for us to come home. And Home it will be...to this House – to our Sinai: to **our** Sacred Space before the closing hour draws nigh upon this Yom Kippur day.

- 1) Join me now in the hymn Yigdal – Praise to the Living God
- 2) Followed by a brief benediction

No need to leave –

Music & Meditation in chapel

Conversation on Israel in the Marion Steeg Library

2:00 Young Family Service

3:00 Afternoon

4:00 Memorial

5:00 Concluding