

VaYeytze

## 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht

In the back pages of Reform Judaism, the magazine of the Union for Reform Judaism in the USA, there are adverts for all manner of things Jewish; one of the ones that first caught my eye some time ago was that promoting a very special wedding service. Simply put, the business in question specialised in broken glass, specifically the glass stamped on by the groom, or bride, at the end of a Jewish wedding ceremony.

Essentially, by some process that, even in my wildest imaginings, is beyond my comprehension, all the bits of the shattered glass are gathered together and then set in a rectangle of hard, clear plastic. To look at it is rather like seeing a glass that has exploded into pieces, each fragment being visible to the eye as it flies off in different directions.

I find such things impressive and disturbing in almost equal measure. Impressive in terms of the practical and scientific achievement and disturbing because they defy or seem to defy the old dictum that something which has shattered into a myriad of shards can never be restored.

This Shabbat, a mere four days after the 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of a day that destroyed any pretence that a viable Jewish life was to be lived under the Nazi Reich, we remember Kristallnacht, the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> of November 1938, the Night of Broken Glass. It was the night when a nationwide pogrom was unleashed on the Jews of Germany resulting in the destruction of over a thousand synagogues, the ransacking of tens of thousands of Jewish homes and businesses, the physical assault of Jews in every German city, town and village, the arrest and deportation to concentration camps of over 30,000 Jewish men between the ages of 16 and 60 (over a thousand of whom were to die in their place of incarceration) and the murder on the night of 91 individuals.

The week before last I flew with other senior faculty of Leo Baeck College to Berlin, the once divided capital of Germany, whose infamous wall was demolished, in an extraordinary coincidence, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1989: the purpose of our very brief visit was to meet with our opposite numbers at the Abraham Geiger Kolleg.

Now what, you may be wondering, IS the Abraham Geiger Kolleg? It is a rabbinical seminary, founded in 1999 as an institute at the University of Potsdam, located in the grounds of the Sans Souci Palace, the summer home of Frederick the Great of Prussia and his successors. Its purpose is to train rabbis for Eastern Europe and especially for the new communities of Germany, many of which have sprung up all over the country since its reunification, often in places where ancient Jewish congregations had been eradicated by the Nazis. Geiger's first ordinands graduated in 2006, and last week the latest cadre of graduates, including Germany's second ever woman rabbi, received semikhah and set out to further the growth of 21<sup>st</sup> century congregations in Germany, the birthplace of Reform Judaism.

Being at a shacharit service at the College, conducted by its male and female students, was a moving and thought-provoking experience: Jews from the FSU, from Germany, from Israel and America, joining together and leading a service that we would call 'orthodox' or 'traditional' but whose liturgy contains elements that are found in our own prayer book, and which was designed to cater for Jewish affiliation across the spectrum, from German *Liberal* to modern orthodox.

In many ways Abraham Geiger College is similar to Leo Baeck, to which it owes much of its inspiration, its intellectual ethos, its commitment to egalitarianism, and its striving to create rabbis of intellectual, academic, pastoral and spiritual excellence. Its intimate relationship with Potsdam University, which has a thriving Hebrew and Jewish studies department, and the funding it receives from the German State are enviable to those of us who serve an institution which is woefully underfunded and yet which is still expected to produce excellent.

Our purpose in Berlin was to investigate the potential for joint ventures, and particularly to consider ways in which our respective students, and alumni, could enjoy strengthened ties for their mutual benefit.

Since its inception in 1956, Leo Baeck College, on whose faculty I am proud to have served since 1984, has seen a key part of its mission as working to rebuild Progressive Judaism in Continental Europe by training rabbis from the continent who wished to serve there. It is an altruistic task and one that we have performed successfully, sending rabbis to France, Belgium, Holland, Hungary, Germany and the FSU; and it is a duty that we continue to acknowledge, with students from Germany, Italy, Hungary, Russia and France currently studying with us.

But with the demolition of the Berlin Wall and Germany's reunification, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc, tens of thousands of Jews who had no interest in or connection with Orthodox Judaism started to clamour for rabbinic support, and it was quite obvious that one non-orthodox seminary in Europe could no longer fulfil that task alone.

In addition, the sort of Jews that formed themselves into communities in Germany were initially more social and cultural than spiritual, coming as many of them did from a background in former eastern bloc countries where religion in general had been frowned upon and an open profession of Judaism could destroy a career and a life. These Jews had little understanding of Progressive Judaism, and at best felt more comfortable with a traditional style of service, albeit with some Reform characteristics, such as mixed seating and the acceptance of women rabbis. The Geiger College is in many ways the perfect institution to train rabbis for these sorts of congregations, given that they are neither Liberal or Reform, and if anything 'modern Orthodox' in practice, providing they can persuade them that a rabbi could be very useful and that religious services might even enhance their lives!

So the rabbinic programme of the Geiger College on the continent of Europe serves these congregations, and is an ideal seminary for producing rabbis to minister to them, just as the Leo Baeck College is the right place for those with a strong Liberal or Reform ideology to train for the rabbinate, so as to be able to work in like-minded congregations in the United Kingdom, or Ireland, or in the rest of Europe.

On the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> of November 1938, a national pogrom began the destruction of a Jewish community that had been in existence since Roman times, shattering it into little pieces. It was an act of violence, bigotry and mindless hatred, and though it harmed German Jews directly in the longer term it did much more harm to Germany itself.

Seventy two years later we can safely state that a miracle has happened, as Jewish communities have re-established themselves in towns and cities across Germany where there have been no Jews since before the Second World War, and to make that miracle complete, in our days a German seminary, owing much to the great Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums of Berlin, where Leo Baeck taught, has been founded.

On occasions such as this, when we recall events whose supreme negativity almost defies description, when we mourn the lives lost, the culture destroyed, the institutions and congregations ravaged, when we bring to mind the shattered pieces of glass, it is all too easy to become so immersed in sadness and pain that we forget the renaissance of Jewish life that has also taken place in Germany in the last forty years, which forms the perfect rejoinder to the Nazi aims and demonstrates yet again the indestructible will of the Jewish people not just to survive but to prosper.

My speedy trip to the Abraham Geiger College, a matter of 10 days before the anniversary of Kristallnacht demonstrated that pieces of glass can be put back together, and makes me feel, this year for the first time ever, that while looking back with sadness I can look at the present, and towards the future, with joy.

Amen

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh

DJPC

November 13<sup>th</sup> 2010