



FROM AUSCHWITZ TO SINAI

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Around 20 years ago I was privileged to travel twice to Poland and Israel with 130 Australian students and a contingent of adults as part of the March of the Living. This is a copy of some of my reflections from the time.

To travel to the death camps and killing fields of Poland is to enter into the heart of darkness. We returned on the Shabbat when the Torah portions of *Acharei Mot Kedoshim* were read, and the names of the Parshiot articulated something of this powerful journey through the landscape of darkness into the light of Israel.

“*Acharei Mot*” literally means “after the death,” and refers to the events after the death of two of Aharon's sons. Aharon's reaction to their deaths is one of stunned silence, “*Vayidom Aharon.*” His contained pain and anguish is brilliantly conveyed by the brevity of this description.

There is an awful silence that envelopes what was Jewish Poland. It is evident not only in the sites of suffering; the obscenely beautiful, rolling grasslands that now cover the Plaszow Concentration Camp and the quiet, forested landscape of Treblinka, broken only by the stunted forest of stones (erected in memory of the decimated Jewish communities of Europe). It is evident not only in the unbearable silence of the gas chambers; the small experimental chambers of Majdanek or Auschwitz belying the enormity of the crimes and pain unleashed there. It is evident not only in the quiet and gentle forests outside Tykocin, where an entire Jewish community was systematically shot on one August day.

No, it is evident also in the eerie silence of

the remaining Jewish sites of Poland; the beautiful, vacant Shuls in the squares of Cracow, the magnificent Yeshiva in Lublin, emptied of its students. The silence of an absent community.

Out of this silence rise questions that any thinking, sensitive Jew must surely confront: Where was man? Where was humanity as the trains rolled on to Auschwitz? Where were the Allies? And where was G-d?

Yet there is another word - “*Kedoshim*” - holiness, sanctity, suggesting that somehow, out of the silence, we can and must structure a framework of meaning and continuity.

The dazzling darkness at the revelation at Sinai, the “*Arafel,*” would help the Jews face the terrible darkness of the human soul that they would encounter in the centuries to come. The awesome darkness of Sinai would help them triumph over the awful darkness of Auschwitz. So Sinai with its Kedusha and its imperative of “*Kedoshim Teheyu*” would help, not only the *Kedoshim* going to their terrible deaths, but also the living, to create and recreate, to build sanctuaries of integrity and love and communities of caring. Sinai would help Israel rebuild itself so that a people returning to its land would weep no more salt into the Dead Sea, but feed and take life from Israel's other great internal sea, the living sea of the Kineret.

As David Hartman put it: “We will mourn forever because of the memory of Auschwitz. We will build a healthy new society because of the memory of Sinai.”

To travel from Auschwitz to Jerusalem is to move from death to life, from “*Acharei Mot*” to “*Kedoshim.*” With all its troubles and traumas, it is in the soft and honeyed light of Jerusalem that we continue to find a source of continuity, comfort and hope.





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