

# REMEMBRANCE & HOPE: DISCOVERING TESHUVAH IN AN UNEXPECTED PLACE

## A JOURNEY OF RETURN



### THE HIGH HOLY DAYS, THE MOST SACRED

days of the Jewish calendar, fall this year in late September. A core theme of this season is *teshuvah* (“repentance”). This summer, a group of eight rabbis and two cantors from the West Coast traveled to Germany for a week-long trip at the invitation of the German government. “The root of the word *teshuvah* is ‘turning,’ and *teshuvah* connotes turning, returning and renewed attention to that which needs our awareness,” one rabbi wrote after his trip. “I never imagined that a week in Germany would prepare me for the High Holy days.”



Embassy  
of the Federal Republic of Germany  
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### One Week in Germany

In July, Germany’s Consul General to Los Angeles, Hans Jörg Neumann, accompanied a group of rabbis and cantors on a government-sponsored trip to Germany to provide them with a depiction of Jewish life in modern Germany and Germany’s Holocaust remembrance culture.

“With only a few exceptions, the rabbis and the cantors had very little prior knowledge of modern Germany,” Neumann wrote. After spending time with the Jewish, German and Israeli communities in Berlin and Munich, the rabbis expressed surprise at the large and vibrant Jewish population in modern Germany – as well as the culture of

remembrance about Germany’s past.

Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh, who grew up in 1970s New York City, says she was surprised at how deeply Germans reflect on their past and noticed that this self-reflection does not occur in her home country.

“I remember sitting in class (as a child in New York), watching footage of bodies found in the camps, and being told that Germany was a horrible place which I should never support,” Rabbi Missaghieh writes. “As an American, I used to think of myself as morally superior. But now, seeing how Germans continually dig deep and own their dark history, I admit that we Americans

are not their equals when it comes to collectively self-reflecting on our past. We have not yet fully owned how we decimated Native American communities or how our capture of Black people in Africa and bringing them to America as slaves has deeply affected the current American psyche – let alone the continued racism and systemic inequality we perpetuate.

Germany is a light onto the nations. I now deeply respect how Germans continue to take responsibility for the Holocaust and the well-being of refugees. They live the phrase, ‘Never again.’”

### A Visit to Dachau

A particularly memorable stop during the weeklong visit was the trip to Dachau – the first Nazi work-and-concentration camp that was ever built, and the one that became the model for all other camps. The guide at Dachau was a non-Jewish German woman named Nicole, who said she became troubled when she learned of Germany’s past. After she heard a survivor speak about her Holocaust experience, she began to question her own family and friends about their knowledge and involvement with the Nazi regime. Today, she encourages Germans to educate themselves and others about the atrocities of the Holocaust to “make sure institutional



*Opposite page: A visit to the Dachau concentration camp. Above: The group visits the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. Bottom: In front of the Jewish Museum Berlin.*

hatred never happens again,” Rabbi Missaghieh recalls.

During the visit, one phrase that stood out to the rabbis was that Germans today “don’t feel individually guilty but they do feel collectively responsible” for what happened during the Holocaust – a sentiment that materialized many times over during the trip.

### Educating Germany’s Youth

While in Berlin, the rabbis and cantors visited the Ruth-Cohn School, a high school for kids interested in becoming educators. This school hosts an annual “Day Against Forgetting” – a day where survivors, academics, journalists, social workers and descendants of Nazis are invited to speak about the Holocaust.

“One girl shared about how moved she was to hear Heinrich Himmler’s great-niece expose the shame she felt about her great-uncle’s actions. Another teacher spoke about how five of her uncles were forced to fight in the German army and all five were killed; and another girl spoke about how her grandmother was a

tailor and cook for a Nazi family,” Rabbi Missaghieh says. “As American Jews, we don’t hear the voice of the perpetrators. It was an eye-opening experience for all of us.”

### The Struggle with Forgiveness

For Rabbi Yoel H. Kahn, one of the most memorable stops was a visit to a large community center and synagogue in Munich, which has a memorial in its underground passageway.

“One side lists names of Munich Jews who died,” he writes. “Engraved on the opposite wall are words we have come to expect: remembrance.... learning....memory. The last word on the wall caught me, and our entire group by surprise: forgiveness. We stood and stared for several minutes, agreeing together that this is a term that we had never seen in any American Holocaust memorial. Yet for the contemporary Munich Jewish community, this is part of who they are and how they see themselves as part of the community where they live. To live as a Jew in Germany today – and there is a vibrant Jewish community, including Israelis, Jews





*The group of visiting rabbis with Dr. Charlotte Knobloch, president of the Israeli community of Munich and Upper Bavaria (sixth from right)*

from the former Soviet Union and children and grandchildren of survivors and returnees – does not require forgiving individuals for their horrific deeds but does involve, it appears, being open to moving towards reconciliation - and perhaps forgiveness - for the German people and nation.”

### A New Germany

Today, many Jews have made the decision to move or return to Germany. While in Berlin, the rabbis and cantors attended a service at the New Synagogue on Shabbat morning. Rabbi Missaghieh was surprised to hear that two-thirds of the congregation consisted of Jews who chose to immigrate to Germany.

“When I asked the rabbi’s husband who the members of the congregation were, he said they were about one-third German-born

and two-thirds from the former USSR, Israel or the U.S.,” she says. “It was incredible to see over 20 German-speaking children singing Hebrew songs and being raised as Jews in a building that was almost destroyed on *Kristallnacht*.”

After the end of the Second World War, some Germans took steps to help the Jewish community rebuild itself in Germany. One such group, the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (ARSP), which was founded by a Protestant pastor after the war, asked Holocaust survivors to allow ARSP volunteers to visit their country, with our hands and with our means, to build a village, a settlement, a church, a hospital, or whatever else they want for the common good, as a sign of reconciliation.”

Rabbi Kahn says he was “struck by the name of this church member-funded organization; the

commitment to repentance is expressed through restorative acts of repair and justice.”

### Stumbling Stones

Germany – and especially Berlin – continues to diversify and its Jewish community continues to thrive. But Germany also places high value on remembrance. Scattered throughout Europe (and especially Germany) are commemorative brass plaques that eternalize the lives that were lost in the great tragedy of the 20th century. These so-called *Stolpersteine* (“stumbling stones”) are small plaques that commemorate the victims of the Nazi regime, paying tribute to individuals who lost their lives or lived on the street where the plaque is planted. The stones are implanted by artist Gunter Demnig and represent a “much deeper intrusion of memory into everyday life,” according to the artist.

After seeing a stumbling stone on the ground in front of an apartment complex in Berlin, Rabbi Missaghieh said she “couldn’t help but imagine that every morning when the residents of this building leave for their day, they are reminded of those who once lived in this place and were taken to their death at Theresienstadt.”

Reconciliation is important, but remembrance even more so.

Over the course of six days, the rabbis and cantors had numerous meetings with community members and government officials and visits to the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the New Synagogue in Berlin and the Berlin City Mission. Most participants left Germany with a new sense of awareness about how the country has changed and moved forward while continuously remembering its past.

“As we prepare for this High Holy Day season, I hope that we, as individuals and as a community will ask ourselves: Where are we accountable even if we are not personally responsible?” Rabbi Kahn asks. “When and how have we not done enough? What do we need to remember and what must we be sure not to forget? How can we transform our regrets and failures into constructive actions of teshuvah and grace? What are the deep wounds that have yet to be fully named - and which may still one day yet be places of reconciliation and forgiveness?”

*Contributors to this article include Consul General Hans Jörg Neumann; Yoel Kahn, Ph.D., Senior Rabbi, Congregation Beth El, Berkeley, CA; and Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh, Associate Rabbi, Temple Israel, Hollywood, CA.*

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