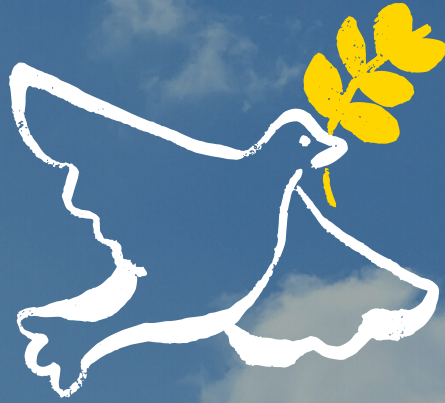




**JEWISH
CENTER**
OF
THE HAMPTONS



Pray For
Ukraine

Reflections from a
Mission to Poland
with Rabbi Joshua Franklin



Reflections from a Mission to Poland

April 10: Traveling To Krakow

The last time that I was in Krakow was back in 2005. Krakow is a popular European destination to visit, but is generally only a scenic detour on the way to visit Auschwitz (about an hour outside the city). 95% of tourists who visit Krakow also visit Auschwitz. Our delegation is in the 5% minority on this trip, as one no longer needs to travel from Krakow to Auschwitz to find evidence of humanity at its worst. One needs only to visit the streets of Krakow and talk to some of the Ukrainian refugees who have fled horrific crimes against humanity from their native Ukraine.





April 10: Arrived in Krakow

I arrived in Krakow earlier this morning. I had some extra time before meeting up with the delegation of rabbis, so I went straight to find one of the refugee centers. It wasn't difficult, there seem to be refugee villages like the one in the picture scattered throughout the city. I handed out cards made by kids from Elenor Whitmore ECC with money in them, as well as chocolate bars. There are a lot of mothers with their children, but without their fathers who are back in Ukraine. I was able to talk to a few of the refugees who spoke some English. Tomorrow, we're headed to the JCC of Krakow, which is housing, feeding, and supporting hundreds of refugees each day. We'll be spending a great deal of time there, as this is our main partner organization for the trip. On Tuesday, we're going to the border.





Reflections from a Mission to Poland

April 11: Why Are We Here?

The Bal Shem Tov would instruct his followers to recite the following Hebrew formula before performing a mitzvah *בְּהִיטָה תֵּבְרָא נְמוּנֵי נְכוּמֵי יְהוָה* Behold, I am ready to fulfill the mitzvah of..." What is the mitzvah that I am here to fulfill? There are quite a few:

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

To love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). Being here is a form of radical loving of strangers who may not be very much like us, but they are still our fellows, and we make sure that they have dignity in the wake of the Russians treating them like animals.

מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל דְּבָרֵיהֶם לְבָקֵר חוֹלִים. וּלְנַחֵם אֲבֵלִים.

The mitzvah of visiting those who are sick and in mourning (Mishnah Torah, 14:1) Judaism gives particular attention to comforting the widow and the orphan. So many refugees are here without adult males. Mothers and children line the streets while their husbands are fighting a war, many of whom have been, or will be killed.

לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל־דַּם רֵעֶךָ

Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow (Leviticus 19:16). It's not enough to condemn atrocities, we need to work to stop them by whatever means are at our disposal.

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ

You must tell this story to your children, and you have the sacred responsibility to do so (Exodus 13:8). When my children ask about what I did as a rabbi when the Ukrainian people were being massacred and raped, I want to have an answer, and I want to be able to tell them what I saw.



וְאַתֶּם עֵדִי

You are my witnesses, declares God (Isiah 43:12). One of the reasons we came to Poland was to bear witness to the plight of Ukrainian refugees who fled unimaginable horrors in Ukraine. We may be inclined to turn away from the sight of blood and suffering, but we are responsible to see the pain and suffering, to listen to the cries of the afflicted, and to remember what we saw.

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אֶתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה

(Avot 2:16)

We know that the work is daunting, yet we know that it is not our responsibility to complete the work, only that we do it. The amount of support the Ukrainian refugees need both in Ukraine and abroad cannot be fixed by just one person or by dollars; the traumas will be passed from one generation to the next, and we will always be required to support them.

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיֵּב אָדָם לְהִרְאוֹת אֶת עֲצָמוֹ כְּאֵלֵי הוּא בְּעֲצָמוֹ יֵצֵא עִתָּה מִשְׁעֶבֶד מִצְרַיִם

In every generation each person is required to show themselves as if they themselves left Egyptian slavery (Passover Haggadah). How can we demonstrate that we were once refugees? By showing compassion to those who currently are.

There are so many reasons why we need to be here, each a mitzvah to be fulfilled. There is so much work to be done. How could we not be here? We are here to do what 75 years ago we hoped that the world would do for us.



Reflections from a Mission to Poland

April 11: Yaroslava And the Rally

At a rally in the market square of Krakow, I talked to Yaroslava. She was in Kyiv when the war started. She emphasized over and over again constantly feeling that she was going to die. She was hiding from the attacks in the basement and in the subway tunnels, sure that her time on earth was limited. The traffic out of the city was moving slower than those who were walking. She somehow managed to hitch a ride, and made it across the border to Krakow. No one should have to endure what she has gone through, but her experience seems all too common. Many have fared much worse, and she is one of the lucky ones..





April 12: Soul-Suffocating Pain

Why am I writing at 5:38AM in the morning? I woke up around 2AM and couldn't go back to sleep. No, it's not jet leg; it's the stories of the Ukrainian refugees that have been playing on repeat in my head. There's been one story in particular that I've been ruminating upon.

A Ukrainian woman named Nastia from Nikolaev told a story that's similar to that of many refugees; she fled with her 5 year old daughter leaving her husband behind to fight. Her parents are also still in Ukraine, though they will be trying to get to Krakow soon enough. She doesn't plan to go back to Ukraine, ever. There has been far too much trauma for her and her daughter, and she shared that she never wants to subject her daughter to the possibility of the horrors of the Russians again. She already wakes up hysterical in the middle of the night from the traumas. Her daughter now feels Polish, and is showing signs of joy in Krakow; her childhood can't stand being uprooted again.



Nastia told us that: "I don't want to hide anything from my daughter, so even if it's hard, I want her to know what the Russians did, and what they are doing. The Russians want us to suffer, and have no pity of us. I showed her pictures of what's going on." And then she said something that I thought I misheard (I didn't, I heard it correctly). She said: "My daughter needs to learn how to hate the Russians." She emphasized the atrocities that the Russians are committing, which include mass rapes of women and children, and then murdering them. An Israeli aid worker put it simply: "they are all out of rape kit sutures in Ukraine." Can we really expect someone who has fled this kind of trauma to not hold onto hatred? Did Jews not feel the same way toward the Germans? Yitzhak Zuckerman who survived the Holocaust once remarked: "If you could lick my heart, it would poison you."

I'm awake trying to process this woman's soul-suffocating pain.



Reflections from a Mission to Poland

A Pre-Passover Seder in Poland

The motifs of Passover are present all around us. The endless questions, the afflicted people, an exodus from narrow straights, the bitterness, the salty tears, and a people looking for redemption. Passover will begin in a few days, but we joined with other Jewish aid workers by the border for a special pre-Passover Seder. I sat next to a non-Jewish man who seemed out of place at first. John came to Poland a few weeks ago from a town near Toronto. He didn't speak the language, he had no special skills, but just decided he needed to do something. He arrived at the airport and took a cab to the border. He didn't come with any non-governmental organization. At the refugee center in Pzemesyl, he picked up a broom and has been sweeping and cleaning for the last few weeks. He paid his own way, and stays at a local hotel. At first I found his story quite strange, but the more I think of it, the more I admire this guy. For several Ukrainians joining the Seder, this was their first official Passover experience; yet they have been living the Haggadah for the past few months.





The Poland That Your Grandparents Told You About is Not the Poland of Today

When I was in college, I read Jan Gross's book *Neighbors* about the Polish town of Jedwabne during World War II. Jedwabne had a large Jewish population, and when the Nazis came into town, it wasn't the Germans who brutally murdered the Jews in town, it was their Polish neighbors, the townspeople who lived side by side the Jews, and even the Christian clergy. For a long time I've bore the feeling that Poles have continued to harbor antisemitism that they've passed on from one generation to the next.

A lot has happened on this trip that has led me to believe that the narrative about the antisemitism of the Poles is anachronistic. One interesting thing that I observed on this trip was that at the seven synagogues in Krakow, none of them have major security. In comparison to Florence, Italy, where the synagogue security guards all but strip search anyone who enters, the Polish Jewish community doesn't fear their neighbors anymore, because they aren't experiencing the threats that Jews go through in other parts of the world.

But here's the thing that has endeared me to the Poles. When 2.5 million Ukrainians streamed across the border in the opening days of the attacks on Ukraine, Polish towns and cities dropped everything to make sure that they could welcome their neighbors and take care of them. They reopened their malls as refugee centers and shelters, they closed their train stations and made them refugee hubs, the entire government office of Przemsyl was even reassigned from their governing duties to work at the refugee centers. Spare bedrooms in Polish homes became housing for the majority of Ukrainian refugees. The Poles have stood up and showed the world what it means to love their neighbor. Maybe some Poles were as Jan Gross depicted them. Even if that was the case, Poland has redeemed itself. They have shown a larger humanitarian backbone as a country and as a people than any other place on earth at any period of time, and they deserve the respect of the world. The Poland that your Jewish grandparents told you about is not the Poland of today.

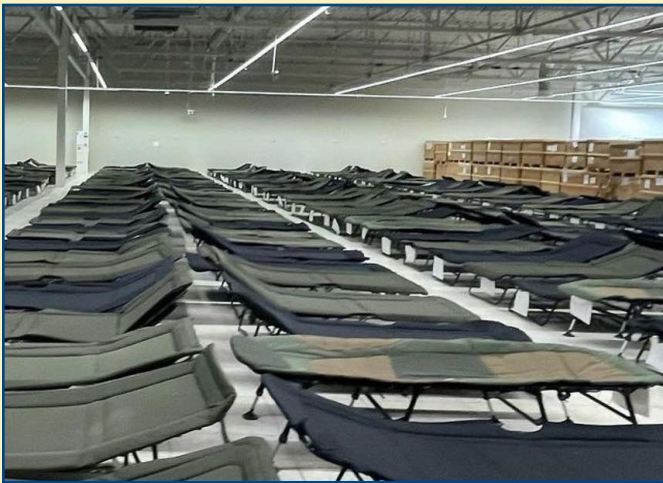


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“As Jews, we always hear the voices of Holocaust victims calling to us from the grave, and from the stones on the street that they once-upon-a-time walked on. We are custodians of their memory. But we are also judged by their memories. How would they see what we are doing and where we failing? Some people see the Polish Jewish community as unfortunate victims of history that happen to be stuck here. Yet the stones say something different: they cry out that this Jewish community in Krakow has purpose once again. They say that we’re not a place to be pitied with our empty synagogues. They remind us that our new role is to be on the front lines and help the other. Since February 24, I come to work and try to hear these lost Jews whose voices were silenced long ago.” – Jonathan Ornstein



WITH RABBI JOSHUA FRANKLIN





pray for peace