

Yom Kippur 5768
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Adolf Hitler had a plan. I am not talking about his plan to kill all of us, his final solution to the Jewish problem. I am referring to his plan to build a museum filled to overflowing with Jewish artifacts, a museum which he would name the Museum of an Extinct Race. As the war progressed, Hitler ordered Jewish objects from all over Europe—mezuzot, Torah pointers, b'samim boxes, Torah scrolls, t'fillin—to be shipped to warehouses in Prague. These objects would be displayed in the Museum of an Extinct Race.

This past summer, my wife Fran and I visited Prague, a magnificent, beautiful and yet for us sometimes very depressing city. Prague boasts beautiful synagogues, including the Alt-Neue shul which was built in the year 1270, and which still holds services. Its Jewish treasures are complemented by other tourist attractions, Christian and secular. Its bridges, architecture, cobblestone streets, museums, Cathedrals and castles are astonishing. But Prague was also challenging. The Holocaust was with us throughout our visit in many powerful ways. One of the shuls has on its walls beautifully calligraphed names of every Czech who was killed by the Nazis. The Terezinstadt concentration camp is only a 45 minute drive from Prague, and we took one of the many guided tours of the camp. It was profoundly moving, but of course also depressing. And as we toured some of the shuls, we noticed that on the main floor the pews had been removed, and replaced with display cases. Inside the display cases were Kiddush cups, Torah pointers, b'samim boxes and much more, and they were beautiful. But at the same time that we looked at these magnificent objects, we kept having a nagging thought: isn't this what Hitler wanted? Synagogues without services, just display cases—synagogues which had been turned into museums?

But let me tell you more about our trip. One day we walked to what is referred to as The Castle—actually a collection of several old buildings from the Middle Ages. And by the way, one of Prague's most famous Jews—the writer Franz Kafka—wrote his novel *The Castle* based on this very place. As we were walking around the Castle Fran noticed what was obviously a group of Jewish teenagers; the boys were all wearing kippot. Our own daughter, Gaby, had been to Prague with a USY Pilgrimage group a year earlier, so it certainly made sense that another Jewish group was here. Fran said to me “I'll bet that's a USY group.” I asked her how she could tell, since lots of Jewish organizations run summer programs. “Look, she said, the boys are wearing kippot, so it can't be Reform, but the girls are wearing pants, not skirts, so it can't be an Orthodox group. It must be USY. I'm going to find out.” So Fran walked over to the group and tapped one of the teenagers at random on the shoulder and asked him “Are you with a USY group?” He answered yes. Then Fran asked him where he was from and he said—“Los Angeles, Temple Beth Am.” The boy was Matthew Sackman, from our shul, and a good friend of our daughter. When we told him who we were he was so excited that he insisted that one of the other boys take a picture of him with the two of us.

Another story: on Friday night we went to daven at the Alt Neue shul. I said goodbye to Fran at the entrance, since she had to sit behind a very formidable mechitza. As I looked around the shul, I was shocked to see a friend of mine—Avi Peretz—who like Matthew Sackman goes to Temple Beth Am. I walked over and gave Avi a hug—neither of us knew that the other would be in Prague—and we were very happy to see each other. But we were also wondering whether our wives—who had never met each other—would somehow find each other in the women’s section. Well, it turned out that while Fran was in the women’s section Wanda Peretz came up to her and asked “Excuse me, do you speak English?” Fran answered, yes, very well, and asked Wanda where she was from. Of course Wanda said she was from Los Angeles, and then Fran asked her what shul she belonged to, and Wanda answered Temple Beth Am. We ended up having a lovely Friday night dinner together at the Chabad restaurant, and then spending more time together on Shabbat afternoon.

Now you might be wondering what these stories have to do with my subject matter—Hitler’s plan to build a Museum of an Extinct Race. And I fully intend to answer that question, but first let me tell me you where we went after Prague. We flew to Israel. I have been to Israel many, many times, since my mother, and my two brothers and their families live there, and my purpose was to visit family, not climb Masada or snorkel in Eilat. Yet as many times as I had been in Israel, something struck me as we drove and walked around the country: cranes. There were cranes everywhere. Not the bird, the construction crane, needed to build apartment buildings, office buildings and the like. My mother’s town of Kfar Saba was subject to a veritable crane invasion, and it appeared that the number of buildings would double before my next visit. So while some of my visits to Israel left me with indelible impressions of the Kotel, or of the Roman Amphitheater in Kesaria, or of the tayelet along the beach in Tel Aviv, after this visit I kept thinking about all those cranes, and what they represent: a country that in the midst of wars and missile attacks and constant fear of terrorist attack is growing like crazy. It is a country that is not just surviving—it is thriving.

Hitler wanted to build a Museum of an Extinct Race. Sadly, tragically, he came close to succeeding. Before the war there were 90,000 Jews in Prague, with a proud history and a vibrant present. Now, there are about 1,000 Jews. And as I mentioned, some of the magnificent synagogues of Prague are indeed museums, with display cases of t’fillin and b’samim boxes. But while some of these shuls are now museums, none is a Museum of an Extinct Race. Matthew Sackman and so many other Jewish teenagers’ very presence in Prague is proof of that. My meeting Avi Peretz in the Alt Neue shul is proof of that. I wish I could report to you that after all of Hitler’s atrocities the Jewish community of Prague is once again thriving. But I cannot. Nevertheless, there is Matthew Sackman, and Avi and Wanda Peretz and thousands of others to take their place, at least for a little while.

And then there are the cranes. Dominating the landscape of Israel as far as the eye can see, this people is not anywhere near extinct; it’s way too busy building more apartments. Torah pointers and Kiddush cups can fit nicely into a display case, but a crane cannot. No museum can hold, or ever will hold, the indomitable spirit of a people

who will never be extinct. As we say each Pesach, b'chol dor vador omdim aleinu l'chalotenu, in every generation they plot to destroy us, v'hakadosh baruch hu matzilenu miyadam, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from them. Hitler wanted to build a museum for an extinct race, Ahmenijab wants to wipe us off the face of the map. We will fight them with guns, and tanks and airplanes and missiles. But we will also fight them with cranes, cranes everywhere.

B'Rosh Hashono yikatevu, uvyom tzom kippur yechatemu. On Rosh Hashono the decree is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Mi yichyeh, umi yamut—who will live and who will die. On this day, the U'netaneh Tokef prayer tells us, each of our fates for the coming year is decided. We usually think of this in highly personal terms. We conduct a cheshbon ha'nefesh, a strict review of our own souls, we ask forgiveness for the things we did wrong, and promise to work as hard as we can to correct our actions, to be better in the New Year. We ask God—katvenu b'sefer hachayim, write us in the Book of Life, and later on today, during Neilah, we will ask God chatmenu b'sefer hachayim, seal us in the book of life. But Yom Kippur is also a time to contemplate our people. In the Avodah service we remember how the Kohen Gadol would pray first for forgiveness for his own sins; then for forgiveness of the sins of his immediate family and of the all of the Kohanim, and finally for the sins of the entire Jewish people. So too when we pray that we be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life, we pray for ourselves, of course, and for our families and relatives, but we also pray for the entire Jewish people. Mi yichyeh u'mi yamut—who will live and who will die. Throughout history civilizations and peoples have lived and many have died. Whole peoples have been wiped out by plague, by wars. And while we pray today for life for ourselves and our families, we need to pray that the Jewish people, and the State of Israel, will once again this year be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life.

And on this day when ten different times we recite a long list of our sins in the Al Chet prayer, let us be sure to include in our list of sins, and beg for forgiveness for the times we could have helped Israel but did not. The money we didn't give to Federation; the trip we didn't take to Israel; the Israel Action Committee or AIPAC meeting that we chose not to attend; the Israeli products we chose not to buy; the letters to the editor protesting anti-Israel editorials that we failed to write; the letters to our Congressmen and to the White House supporting Israel that we were too busy to send, and the rallies that we failed to attend. For all these sins oh God of forgiveness, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu—forgive us, pardon us, and grant us atonement. It is not just up to God, and it is not just up to the Israeli army, but it is up to each of us to make sure that no Hitler will ever build a Museum of an Extinct Race.

Let me conclude with a story. A number of years ago, when the Pope was planning to visit Israel a committee was formed to plan the Pope's itinerary. Of course the Pope would be taken to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other Christian holy places, and of course all agreed that he should be taken to the Kotel. Then someone suggested that the Pope be taken to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum. One of the committee members, Rabbi David Hartman, said no. Don't take the Pope to Yad Vashem to see dead Jews. Take the Pope to Shaarey Tzedek Hospital, to the maternity ward.

Show him the babies, the Jewish babies. Then take him to Hadassah Hospital and show him more Jewish babies. Let the Pope know that every day all over Israel there are Jewish babies being born.

Am Yisrael Chai.