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Facing a Giant

by [Steven Reece](#) - Wednesday, October 31, 2012, 10:30 AM

What moral crises have you helped resolve? What prepares for coming moral storms?

As I consider these two questions, I would rephrase the first to be asked in this manner:

"What moral crises are you helping to resolve?"

I consider the question in this way due to the nature of with what I am dealing in my work and that is the Holocaust. The Holocaust (Shoah) is one of the greatest moral and ethical failures in history. It is difficult to deal with primarily because of the perception among many Jews that the Holocaust was perpetrated by Christians.

Here are a few things that I have considered about this dilemma and steps that I have taken to deal with it.

By not being Jewish many of us have great difficulty grasping completely in its fullest and most realistic sense the meaning of "Shoah|Destruction". Shoah, the Destruction, is what we know as the Holocaust – the deliberate and systematic Nazi pogrom that burned or gassed to death six million Jews, which included 3.5 million Polish Jews.

I came to feel that I must deal with the aftermath of such a monumental tragedy and lead others to deal with it as well. But the question was, "How?" How do we speak to such an injustice as the Holocaust? How does a Christian speak to one of the most heinous issues to occur in the history of humanity? How might I personally speak to such a heinous crime in which millions of innocent people died at the hands of their "brother" or their "neighbor?"

What if I myself began caring for and restoring just this one neglected and deserted cemetery? What good would it do? Would it do any good? I did not know the answer that day in 2004. But I did know the question: What if I myself began caring and restoring?

When I approached the Jewish community about bringing friends of mine, friends who followed Jesus as volunteers, to clean and restore this Jewish cemetery, I was asked, "Why do you wish to do such a thing?"

In Polish, I responded, "Pojednanie." ("Reconciliation.") Not a big explanation – just one word. I simply said: "Pojednanie" – reconciliation.

But it was enough.

And with that single word, began an eight year journey that has led me to where I am today – working with the Jewish community of Poland through caring for and restoring Jewish cemeteries.

My short answer to this moral dilemma/crisis has become "matzevah," which in Hebrew means a memorial stone that serves as the metaphor/symbol of what The Matzevah Foundation does in remembering and honoring those who suffered and died in the Shoah, restoring and caring for neglected Jewish cemeteries in Poland and reconciling Jews and Christians through a common mitzvah -- doing what is right according to the Torah, which in this case is loving my neighbor and by showing mercy or true-loving kindness.

This is how I am dealing with the moral crisis that I have been given by God's sovereignty.

What prepares me for the coming moral storms?

I believe that from the reading in Johnson, I see that I have done several things well by anticipating several potential and future moral storms that relate to who we are (public perception), what we do (service/ministry) and how we do it (ethical behavior). I would like for us to avoid "normal accidents" that lead to crisis but I must consider the possibility of an abnormal one as well. At this point we have not had to deal with a crisis as an organization and as I said I have led us to consider certain possibilities dealing with the three major areas outlined above.

I am dealing with the first stage of a crisis in what is defined by Johnson (2012, p. 416) a "precrisis."

I have dealt with our identity by solidifying our identity as a non-profit founded by a group of Baptist Christians. I have had to revisit this subject on several occasions because there has been a drift toward just being "Christians" put forth by some of our board members. I remind them of my working history with the Jewish community. I use this designation because of how I approached the Jewish community in Warsaw. In Poland there are Christians, but they are overwhelmingly nearly all Roman Catholic (95% of all Poles). The Jewish community has been mistreated and patronized by their Catholic neighbors. The Baptist Church of Poland is officially called Kościół Chrześcijan Baptystów or the Church of Christian Baptists. Non-Catholic Christians are a minority in Poland even more so Baptists.

So in Poland, being a Baptist Christian is how I was known and presented myself to others.

I approach the Jewish community of North America and particularly those in Atlanta in the same way, which has led to me being received by key leaders and an opening of a dialogue with a rabbi of the largest synagogue and the president of the Jewish Federation. With the rabbi, I am discussing a partnership between The Matzevah Foundation and his synagogue.

What we do is serve the Jewish community by facilitating the Jewish mitzvah of caring for Jewish cemeteries in Poland. The Jewish community is small numbering between 20,000 and 10,000 people and as a result it is not able to care for the 1,200 Jewish cemeteries scattered across Poland. I am a man of my word. If I say we will do something that we are responsible to do it. Presently, I am working with a Jewish man of Polish descent to place a matzevah (memorial stone) in memory of his family who perished in the Shoah because they have no grave. Who will remember them? We will and we will do this by interfacing with the Jewish community of Poland and with government officials to see memorials like these erected today.

Our ethical behavior is the basis for how we do what we do. We do our work with humility and integrity, but we also understand the sensitive nature of working with Jews who are suspicious of our motives. Christians by and large seek to "evangelize" or what some call "proselytize." We do not proselytize. Instead we seek to open a dialogue with the Jewish community as Christians towards reconciliation. I honor the Jews as the root of everything that I know about God and I do what I do out of love for my neighbor. My motives are pure.

Johnson points out in his text (2012) that "ethical leaders also recognize that if the group is to heal, they must foster hope, while honoring the past" (p.428). Johnson was referring to a demonstration of ethical care as a part of crisis management. His statement caught my attention as I considered what we have done with the Jewish

community. We honor the past and touch the present and brings healing to the broken relationship that exists between these two communities. I see how hope is emerging as I deepen the dialogue.

We are opening a conversation. We are seeking to open a dialogue with both Jews and Gentiles. We are beginning to dialogue about the true nature of God's love. To me, love is not an abstract thought. Nor is love a fleeting emotion. Instead, love is action. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And his commandment was best expressed by the deeper matters of the Torah "justice, mercy and faithfulness."

I worked closely with Alek Wąsowicz for three years when I lived in Warsaw. He was on the Rabbinical Commission for Matters of [Jewish] Cemeteries. I began this journey with him. When saying goodbye to Alek as I left Poland in 2008, he said, "In this global world, I do not see why you cannot continue your work from America. You must continue, because you have entered the most difficult dialogue in the world."

I have. I am traveling along the road of dialogue today. With dialogue come questions and opportunities to share more about who I am and who I am following. I am not evangelizing or trying to convert. I am simply telling my story as a follower of Jesus, and build a bridge of mercy that leads toward reconciliation.

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