

Polish-Jewish History, Culture and Reflection

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Introduction

"The action of this play takes place in Poland – that is to say, nowhere."

■ From Alfred Jarry's play, *King Ubu*

Poland was once a "large and famous state" but in 1794, "it vanished from the map" (Ascherson, 1987). Poland no longer existed. This once great nation was partitioned among Russia, Prussia, and the Austrian Empire. Poland was abandoned and forgotten by the rest of the world. But the Poles did not give up and forsake their Polish heritage and identity. In 1918 at the end of World War I, Poland reappeared as an independent nation. However, their independence lasted about twenty years and ended on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded their country. The German blitzkrieg obliterated Poland and thrust the world into war. Hitler and the Nazis inflicted countless horrors and atrocities upon them, yet, Poland endured.

During World War II, Poland lost more than eighteen percent of its population to the war including, three million Poles and roughly three and a half million Jews, who died at the hand of the Nazis. Over the period of the War, Poles lost ten percent of their population while Jews lost ninety percent of their nation to the war.

After Hitler's defeat, Poland stood ready to reclaim its freedom. It never happened. Instead, the Soviet Union absorbed Poland behind the Iron Curtain in 1948, plunging the nation once more under tyranny. For the next fifty years, the Polish people lived under the yoke of communism. The country was filled with oppression and despair. There was no hope. Then in 1981, Solidarity was born and Poland rose against its oppressor. The Solidarity movement unified the country and challenged the corrupt political regime, eventually toppling the communist government in 1989. Then, Poland finally shook off its tyrants and was free.

The Polish nation recovered and has been reintegrated into Europe; however, it has not been the same for Jews in Poland. For all intents and purposes, Jewish culture was lost, destroyed and nearly eliminated from Poland completely, leaving behind only dim shadows of the past in the memories of the Polish people.

Despite this tragic loss, a remnant remains.

There is a small number of Jews remaining in Poland today – according to estimates between 10,000 to 20,000 Jews live in Poland; nonetheless and possibly even more significantly, there are silent witnesses that testify to the influence of the once vibrant Jewish culture lying scattered in 1,200 Jewish Cemeteries throughout Poland. These cemeteries are a visible reminder of the presence of G-d's People – the Jews in Poland, who lived among Gentiles for nearly a thousand years.

"As the last of the Holocaust survivors pass away, and with them the memory of the heights of Polish Jewry, the nation's menorahs seem to be flickering back to life" (Boland, 2007, para. 1). The rebirth of Judaism in Poland is significant, as I believe it

reflects G-d's desire to heal and renew the land and its people. This idea of rebirth, a "flickering back to life" becomes one of the underlying rationales of what drives my work in leading The Matzevah Foundation.

The Shoah: An Overview

"The facts of life and death remain the same. We live and die, we love and grieve, we breed and disappear. And between these existential gravities, we search for meaning, save our memories, leave a record for those, who will remember us."

■ **Thomas Lynch**

In January 1933 Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany and began the radical transformation of Germany. His plan was simple: nullify the undesirables (concentration camps for political prisoners and mentally ill), multiply the desirables (Lebensborn and eugenics for biologically and racially pure Aryan traits) and liquidate the barriers (thus, discriminatory actions against Jews, considered the primary hindrances to pure Aryan racial development) in order to establish German supremacy in Europe.

World War II in Europe was a political and economic trauma for the Jews. But more so than that, it was a spiritual devastation – a destruction to which Jews refer today as the Shoah. Of the 11 million European civilians, who died during the Second World War, six million people died simply because they were Jewish; the number of deaths is staggering when considering the fact that eighty percent of the European Jewish population perished or was exterminated at the hands of the Nazis within the six year period of the war (Krysińska & Lester, 2006, p. 141).

It is difficult to understand the scale and depth of the collective trauma suffered by the Jews during the Shoah. Researchers, such as Krysińska and Lester (2006), have examined "empirical research and clinical observations concerning the long-term consequences" arising from the trauma of the Shoah suffered by European Jews (p. 142). These researchers note the gross injustice committed by Nazi Germany against an innocent group of people – the Jews. Furthermore, European Jews had suffered persecution at the hand of their neighbor for centuries; however, during the era of the Second World War and the Shoah, the Jewish people endured at the hands of the Nazis "the most severe and unprecedented oppression and terror" in their history (Krysińska & Lester, 2006, p. 142).

The context of Poland is important as is the relationship that Jews and Poles have shared over their long history, which at times has been strained and embittered. The events of the Shoah – the Nazi Final Solution – only worked to exacerbate the difficulty in their relations even further. Common belief is that the Nazi regime chose Poland for the setting of the Final Solution because of Polish anti-Semitism; however, this is not the case. The Nazis chose Poland strategically "as their gigantic laboratory for mass murder" simply for the reason that Poland was the home to the largest Jewish population in Europe (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 3).

Although the Shoah was not conceived by Poles, it “had tainted Polish soil forever” (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 6). Dealing with the aftermath of such a tragic event would require cleansing Poland and its people from this “terrible burden of history” by allowing the Polish people to see themselves and their country “in the light of truth” (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 6).

The Shoah as such “is the tragedy of the Poles” because during dark days of the Nazi extermination of the Jews, Poles “were exposed to an unprecedented moral trial” through which it would be difficult to say if anyone else “would have come through it better” (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 7). Moreover, Poles were eyewitnesses and saw firsthand the events of the Shoah and the plight of their Jewish neighbors. At times Poles were noble and assisted their neighbors under the threat of execution and on other occasions, they were slightly more than bystanders doing little or nothing to protect their Jewish neighbors from the Nazi brutality.

Nonetheless on at least one occasion, Poles became participants of barbarism, rounding up and brutally murdering their Jewish neighbors in a pogrom – an organized massacres of particularly Jews (“Definition of pogrom,” 2012). Jewish perception of the role of Poles in the Shoah often conflicts with the historical record. Both Poles and Jews suffered, albeit disproportionately, at the hands of their Nazi oppressors.

With the permission of Nazi officials, Polish residents of Jedwabne, Poland brutally murdered 1,600 of their Jewish neighbors on a hot summer’s day in July 1941. Jews were rounded up and humiliated, then were beaten, clubbed or hacked to death; however, most of those who died were eventually herded into a barn and burned alive. This occurrence was extreme and not the norm; however, it occurred and Poles took part in the murder of Jews. Nevertheless, this event has not been examined historically due to the fact that many historians discounted the grim eyewitness testimony of the Jewish survivors of the event as being too incredible to be true.

Jan Gross points clearly to the fact that it appears that journalists and historians have taken “sedatives” and did not address the “mass murder of Jedwabne Jews” for decades believing that the Germans were the only ones who murdered Jews in Poland (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 77). Furthermore, Gross challenges the status quo of historians of this period and urges them to revise “the approach to sources . . .” arguing that “we must take literally all fragments of information at our disposal” and realize that what the Jewish community truly experienced during the Holocaust “can only be more tragic than the existing representation of events based on surviving evidence” (Zimmerman, 2003, pp. 78-79).

The Polish People in General

The people of Poland are generally shy in nature. Some people, however, are very outgoing. Nevertheless, the Polish people are a lovely and humble people, who often feel very insecure next to people from America. Even if they have never traveled to the States, they have heard and know the type of lifestyle that Americans have and live in comparison to theirs.

Poles may ask – probably will ask you about your life specifically, if you have a chance to dialogue with them. They will often ask questions about finances and how

much things in the States cost. They are savvy and realize that many Americans live what they consider to be a “high life” or what we call “living big.” Understand that these types of questions are not necessarily considered personal questions, but general questions concerning a comparison of lifestyles.

On the other hand, be aware of the type of questions that you ask Poles. Many Poles are still living under the faded shadow of communist times where people did not pry into the personal lives of others and personal information was not given for fear of persecution. THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT. Americans tend to be forward and Poles tend to be reserved. Please do not ask questions regarding their opinions or personal lives, as they will see your questions as being highly offensive.

Polish students are more relaxed; however, they may not be willing to open up as much as you might expect. Caution and respect are key concepts.

Go slowly and follow the lead of the person with whom you are speaking. If you ask a question and the response is very limited, this is most usually an indication that you have stepped across the line. Don't worry and there is no need to apologize. Simply change the subject. If Poles should raise the subject about their own lives, that is an entirely different matter and in a way, they have invited your questions.

Some subjects to avoid are discussions about alcoholic family members. If this sort of thing exists in a Pole's family, they are almost always embarrassed to speak of it.

Understand too, that Americans may come with many questions about the Soviet years and the Poland's relationship to the Russian people. These are things you may ask about, but do not be surprised if particular people do not wish to discuss this subject.

Political questions or political issues such as President Obama's policies, the Syrian conflict or recent wars in Iraq or Afghanistan should be avoided if at all possible. Remember that Poland is a member of NATO and is a strong ally of the United States and sent troops into these wars; nonetheless, some Poles were not completely supportive.

There is great concern about the future of Poland and its relationship toward Russia and its influence to the east of its border. Remember that Poland has been free of communism since 1989, and with such a relatively few years of freedom under their belt, some Poles may not be generally open to talking about the "what ifs" of the future.

Poles are typically very quiet people and you will more than likely note the stillness of certain places, such as on buses, trams and trolleys. As a rule, people do not usually speak loudly in crowded places. Polish students on the other hand when they are together with their friends and colleagues are often loud and boisterous. This type of behavior is frequently seen as offensive to older Poles.

Americans are thought to be loud and usually all eyes turn to Americans when they enter a room or enter public transportation. This cannot be avoided, but try as much as possible to reflect the Polish culture, by not talking or laughing out loud. One reason for this behavior is not cultural, but practical. Thieves know how Americans behave and are watching and waiting for you. Thieves can spot you “in a heartbeat,” if you behave like “an American.”

In general, Americans look and act confident and this is a characteristic that most Poles do not understand. Be who you are, but be sensitive to the needs of Poles while you are there. Sometimes this may call for silence or a lower tone of voice.

Many Poles with whom you interact have had a great deal of interaction with Americans and other cultures. Nevertheless, please talk **to** Poles and **not down to** them. Although they have been an oppressed people and have been subjected to much hardship, they are intelligent and often very well educated. Your treatment of them with honor, respect and dignity will do much to enable you relate with and be among them. Understand that Poles generally have a low self-image and generally fear that Westerners think of them as stupid or lowly. I have heard this expressed on many occasions, in many ways by Americans.

Catholicism in Poland

Poland has changed tremendously since the collapse of communism. It is very western and materialistic. Young people dress like American or Western young people, listen to the same music for the most part, "taggers" spray paint graffiti on public buildings. Ear rings, tongue rings, rings in other places and tattoos are common among young people of whom many speak English or another European language.

People in general are conservative, but you will encounter those who cover the range of the political spectrum from liberal to conservative, who live simply or live upwardly mobile lifestyles, some of whom may be entangled in drugs or alcohol or who live bohemian – a type of hippy, lifestyle; you may also come across differing religious expressions in Poland such as Islam, Buddhism and other Eastern religious expressions and other religious sects present in Poland.

Interestingly, Poland has more than 2 million atheists, while less than one percent of the population is considered to be Evangelical or Protestant (non-Catholic) Christians.

Poland is a country of approximately 40 million people and 95 percent of them are Roman Catholic. Of these about 30 percent are devout practicing Catholics, 30 percent practicing – which indicates that they attend church every once and a while. However, the remaining 30 percent are nominal – in name only and do not go to church at all. This means that approximately 60 percent of Poland's Roman Catholics somewhat committed in their beliefs or religious practice; nevertheless, they consider themselves to be Christians.

This type of cultural expression of their religious nature may be summed up by these words: "To be Polish is to be Catholic." Catholicism is rooted in their national identity and thus making any other type of religious associations difficult if not impossible culturally speaking.

History of Polish Jews

*Gone now are those little towns where the shoemaker was a poet,
the watchmaker a philosopher, the barber a troubadour.*

*Gone now are those little towns where the wind joined Biblical songs with Polish tunes
and Slavic rue, where old Jews in orchards in the shade of cherry trees lamented for the
holy walls of Jerusalem.*

*Gone now are those little towns, though the poetic mists, the moons, winds, ponds, and
stars above them have recorded in the blood of centuries the tragic tales, the histories of
the two saddest nations on earth.*

■ **Antoni Slonimski**

"Elegy for the Little Jewish Towns"

Translation by Pawel D. Dorman

It is difficult to grasp the complex and at times tragic history of Jews in Poland. Jewish history in Poland is more than just the history of the Shoah. Jewish history in Poland is lengthy and rich, frequently characterized by both good and strained relations between Jew and Christian. It is important to realize that in Poland, Jews found a haven, a sanctuary in which to flourish and live their lives for more than 800 years. Jews were free to be Jews for the most part in Poland, becoming "significant, highly visible and not entirely powerless minority" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 12). In sheer terms of numbers, Poland for centuries was the home to "the largest Jewish population of any country in the world," with the Jewish population comprising "between ten and thirteen percent of the total population" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 12).

According to Hoffman (2000), Polish Jewish history is "one of the longest examples of cross-ethnic and cross-religious coexistence, relevant not only for Jewish self-understanding, but to our broader contemporary situation" (p. 12). As such, Hoffman (2000) views Polish-Jewish interaction as "a kind of extended experiment in multiculturalism" and believes "that some of the conflicts in Polish-Jewish history can be seen in terms of majority-minority tensions, rather than in terms of strong and specific anti-Semitism" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 12). Mutual exclusion or "separateness" along with the inability "to create a common sphere of interests and concerns" seem to be major factors that impacted interaction between Jews and Christian Poles – Poles did not want to include Jews fully, while the majority of Jews desired to keep on being separate and maintain their identity as a "nation" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 17).

I believe, as Hoffman infers, that instead of mutual exclusion, Jew and Christian should work toward inclusion focusing upon the creation of a mutual "sphere of interests and concerns." I term this sphere of interaction, building a bridge of mercy – mercy based on the Jewish understanding of *chesed shel-emet*, "true loving-kindness" along with *gemilut chasadim*, "the giving of loving-kindness." It is through this bridge of mercy that we might join each other in committing acts of kindness that lead toward breaking the cycle of evil, forgiveness, dialogue and ultimately reconciliation.

Anti-Semitism and Diversity in Contemporary Poland

Antoni Sufek (2012) addresses the issue of anti-Semitism among Poles by examining sociological research conducted over a forty year period (from 1967 to 2010) in which researchers from numerous government and academic investigators examined the Polish population's view of their relationship with Jews following World War II and the Shoah. Sufek did not focus on the long-standing history of Polish Roman Catholics

and their Polish Jewish neighbors; rather, he focused on the perception of Polish Jewish relations in the mind of Poles. His analysis points to the fact that Poles have “a general non-acceptance of strangers” but more so have a “specific type of anti-Semitism” throughout their society (Sutek, 2012, p. 425).

Jews have a perceived presence among Poles, who for the most part, are ignorant of the actual numbers of Jews residing in the country. Poles generally have negative emotions towards Jews even though they are barely visible in contemporary Poland. Jews number approximately 20,000 people; however, it is worth noting that prior to the war the Polish Jewish population approached 3.5 million people. Consequently, Poles view Jews symbolically as a “collective entity and a construct of the collective imagination” (Sutek, 2012, p. 425) because Jews are for the most part a lingering mist of a painful albeit distant past. Sutek concludes that the attitudes of Poles towards Jews are shifting in a positive direction which is indicated by an increase in the manifestations of “feelings of closeness” and a decrease in “disapproving cognitive schemes” (p. 425). Changes in the future will rest upon how well Poland rebuilds its national identity and the public discourse concerning “Polish–Jewish relations past and present” (p. 425).

Expressions of Multiculturalism in Poland

Changes in attitudes regarding anti-Semitism and racial diversity are emerging in Poland. Noa Biran and Roy Talmon of the Talmon Biran Architecture Studio in Tel Aviv envisioned a project to place Hanukkah candles in surviving buildings located in the former Warsaw Ghetto. These Jewish men took this action as a means to “contribute to the much wider discussion of multiculturalism in Poland” as they believe “that contemporary Polish culture still has strong ties to the Jewish culture that once flourished on Polish soil” (Aderet, 2013, para. 7).

Biran and Talmon view their actions symbolically and state, “While the lighting of Hanukkah candles is clearly a Jewish custom and sometimes had to be performed in secret by a persecuted minority, here in Warsaw the candles are being lit openly in the windows of these houses” (Aderet, 2013, para. 8). They add, “Hanukkah’s historical significance is its commemoration of the Maccabees’ revolt against the Greeks, and it is positioned here in a new context that commemorates the Nazi occupation of Poland and the extermination of Polish Jewry” (Aderet, 2013 , para. 9).

Multiculturalism is becoming a more common theme in a country that has faced racial and ethnic difficulties in the past. This conclusion is amplified strongly by recent legislative developments within the country. Poland’s government took a bold step toward embracing diversity in Poland by passing what is termed the “National Action Plan for Equal Treatment for the Years 2013-2015,” which provides “detailed recommendations regarding Poland’s anti-discrimination and equal treatment policy” (“Poland: The government has adopted the National Action Plan for Equal Treatment for the Years 2013-2015,” 2013).

Considering Poland’s history, this development is an astounding development in light of the fact that this is the first time for the country’s government to address “the issue of equal treatment of many groups exposed to discrimination” (“Poland: The

government has adopted the National Action Plan for Equal Treatment for the Years 2013-2015," 2013).

A Christian's Response to Shoah

Auschwitz is a museum today, visited by millions of people annually; however, the event it represents – the Shoah, still cries out, demanding justice for innocent victims murdered in its gas chambers. An article that I read in *The Guardian* captures the enduring legacy of hatred and the impact the Shoah has on the world today; it states, "As at Auschwitz, the gates of hell are built and torn down by human hearts, a wrenching debate about anti-Semitism in Poland's past leads us, in the end, to ask questions about ourselves" (Ash, 2009). I have visited Auschwitz on numerous occasions. Every time I visit, I stand in silence surveying what remains and ask myself, "Why?"

Remembering is important. Memory work is not cost-free, especially when we talk about mutually experienced trauma and collectively enacted wrongdoing, as in the Shoah. Judith Lewis Herman (as cited in Krondorfer, 2012, p. 308) writes that "remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims." I see a connection between her words and the Shoah, as it is one of the greatest tragic, moral and ethical failures in the history of humanity.

What should be the Christian response to the Shoah? How should I respond personally to the Shoah?

My Path to Dealing with the Shoah

I did not easily come to understand what my response to the Shoah should be. What could one man do in the face of such a monumental tragedy, such an injustice? How could I even lead others to join me in it? I did not have any answers to these questions because I had not really yet asked them of myself.

However, this began to change during the Kosovo Conflict between March and June 1999, while I was living in Europe. The Kosovo Conflict was characterized by genocide, in which Serbian Christians were killing their Albanian neighbors who were Muslims.

I have written of my experience previously, so in the following sentences, I will quote a few statements.

This action of neighbor killing neighbor led to what has been termed "one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the Twenty First century," due to the fact that "hundreds of thousands of Albanian refugees" fled the country into neighboring countries (Reece, 2012, p. 5). I was a first-hand witness of this crisis "when in May 1999, I volunteer to assist a non-governmental organization in its distribution of humanitarian aid to the displaced people of Kosovo. This was the first time in my life that I had heard first-hand the testimony of people whose loved ones had been killed at the hand of their neighbor. It was overwhelming and tragic" (Reece, 2012, p. 5).

In 2001, I began to consider my experiences in Kosovo in the light of history and Scripture. The Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) reports the first murder in recorded history when Cain killed his brother Able (Bereishit/Genesis 4:8-9). What is important in this account is G-d's statement to Abel regarding his brother's murder: "What have you done? Hark! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the earth."

One day while in Warsaw, Poland "I accidentally stumbled upon the only surviving Jewish synagogue remaining in the city. I began to contemplate my experience in Kosovo" (Reece, 2012, p. 5). And, then it hit me. Innocent bloodshed cries out for justice. So then, I began to deal with the question of the Shoah. I sought a way to speak eloquently, but simply, to that very specific focused issue as a follower of Jesus.

Between 2001 and 2004, I began to read Polish history extensively, especially history related to the Second World War, the Shoah and Jewish and Polish relations. Eventually I had an encounter with a Polish woman of Jewish descent who told me that I should visit a Jewish cemetery where I was working outside of Warsaw.

At that point in the summer of 2004, I visited the Jewish cemetery and encountered first-hand its desolation, destruction and desecration. I began to consider the importance of a cemetery to a Jew and why these Jewish cemeteries were uncared for and overgrown. I realized the reality of the Shoah and its impact on the lives of people because the shedding of innocent blood was crying out for justice.

I researched Jewish cemetery restoration and began to understand its importance. I approached the Jewish community about bringing friends of mine, friends who followed Jesus as volunteers, to assist me and the Baptist congregation that I was leading clean and restore this Jewish cemetery outside of Warsaw.

In March 2005, when I met with Alek Schwarz, a member of the Rabbinical Council for Matters of [Jewish] Cemeteries, he asked me, "Why do you wish to do such a thing?" In Polish, I responded, "*Pojednanie*." In English this word means "reconciliation."

And, with that single word, I began a ten 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. I do not have an answer for the evil and hatred that occurred during the Shoah in Poland, nor do I have a reason for the destruction of the Jewish heritage and culture of Poland. All I know is that I am compelled to speak to the injustice of the Shoah and be a voice for those, who no longer have a voice today.

The Continuum of Jewish-Christian Dialogue

When I began my journey toward reconciliation with the Jewish community, I had no idea as to how to go about interacting with a Jew. Therefore, I approached everything that I did with sensitivity, caution and humility. Today, I have a great deal of experience or experiential learning regarding my interaction with the Jewish community; however, I have never addressed the question of how to best go about interacting or dialoguing with the Jewish community until now.

First of all, I must address the question: "What is the nature of Jewish-Christian dialogue?" In brief, I have encountered primarily in my research three distinct

perspectives held by religious Jews toward dialogue with Christians: no dialogue, limited dialogue and full dialogue.

No Dialogue

The Orthodox Jewish community has been strongly influenced by the Torah and by past experience including the Shoah. Consequently the Jewish community in principle does not wish or see the need to interact with the Christian community. Their rationale is based upon the teaching of the Torah (for example, Numbers 23:9) and their perception that the Shoah was perpetrated by Christians. Important Jewish Orthodox theologians “see a connection between Christianity and the Nazi ideology that created the Shoah” (Porton, 2012).

Eliezer Berkovits, an Orthodox rabbi, stated that Christianity enabled the Nazis to execute the Shoah. He argued, “Without the contempt and hatred for the Jews planted by Christianity in the hearts of the multitude of its followers, Nazism's crime against the Jewish people could never have been conceived, much less executed” (Porton, 2012).

Richard L. Rubenstein, a Conservative rabbi, believes that Christians perpetrated a false image, a “mythological Jew,” which “provided the images and the models for the Nazis” to use in desensitizing the German population to Jews who then became more and more seen “as the devil's surrogates, G-d-killers” producing “fertile ground for Nazi propaganda” (Porton, 2012). Rabbi Raymond Apple summarizes the Orthodox theological positions regarding Jewish-Christian interaction in this manner: “Somewhere in the consciousness of most Jews would be an equation like this: gentiles = persecutors: just leave us alone and don't talk of dialogues. ‘Give us neither your honey nor your sting’ (Numbers 20:10)” (Apple, 2010, para. 13).

Post-Shoah developments in Jewish-Christian relations over the latter half of the Twentieth Century have mitigated to some degree Jewish views of Christianity and its role in the Shoah. In his article, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, Michael Kress (2012) maintains that the interaction between Jews and Christians is improving primarily because Christians have completely re-evaluated their “attitude toward Jews and Judaism,” which has revolutionized the relationship between these two religious groups.

Kress further emphasizes that even though differences remain between them, contemporary Jews may reasonably expect for the first time in history “that these differences will be addressed through interfaith dialogue rather than the violence of the past.” Moreover Kress points out that during the Shoah, Christians played the role of “rescuers – people whose faith led them to risk their lives by hiding or otherwise saving Jews.” The brave acts of these Christians do indeed provide a significant connection between Jew and Christian; “however, the role of Christians and Christianity in perpetuating the Shoah remains a point of contention between the two religions.”

Limited Dialogue

The second Jewish perspective of dialogue regarding Jewish-Christian relations emerges in the framework of a post-Shoah world in which dialogue is limited; nonetheless dialogue is possible albeit strained due to Jewish perceptions toward Christians and their role in the Shoah.

In his paper Dr. Michael Wyschogrod (1986) outlines historical developments in Jewish-Christian interaction prior to and following the Second World War and states that Modern Orthodoxy, centered around Yeshiva University, “does not reject all dialogue with Christian organizations, only theological dialogue” and dialogue may occur that is centered on “social and ethical issues such as poverty, war,” as well as issues related to “justice and international relations” (Wyschogrod, 1986, para. 5). However, religious or theological dialogue is not permissible.

The rationale for this position is justified by a journal article written by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik titled: *Confrontation*.

Soloveitchik (as cited in Wyschogrod, 1986, para. 10) postulates that Jews have always been part of humanity and are for this reason “committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind,” desiring to combat disease and “in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man's rights, in helping the needy, etcetera.”

Dialogue therefore is permissible and limited for theological reasons, which Soloveitchik (as cited in Wyschogrod, 1986, para. 11) views faith as reflecting “the intimate, the private, the paradoxically inexpressible cravings of the individual for and his linking up with the Maker.”

Ultimately Wyschogrod (1986) concludes that Soloveitchik’s postulates “have not prevented theological dialogue” (para. 17) with Christians, stating that “Jews who meet religious Christians emerge strengthened in their faith and grateful for the righteous gentiles who, through Christianity, have approached the G-d of Israel” (para. 21).

Full Dialogue

Wyschogrod’s conclusion leads to the third Jewish perspective regarding Jewish-Christian dialogue. Kress (2012) points out that Jews “have not ignored the changes in Christianity” and in 2000 a group of “Jewish rabbinic and academic leaders issued a statement called *Dabru Emet*,” meaning “Speak the Truth” (para. 8). In *Dabru Emet* the group recognized the work of the Christian “to improve interfaith relations and called on Jews to learn about and likewise affirm the positive changes” (para. 8).

Dabru Emet is a vital statement in Jewish-Christian relations; it makes eight statements upon which “Jews and Christians could base dialogue” (para. 8). Below, please find the listing of the eight tenets of *Dabru Emet* (“*Dabru Emet: A Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity*,” 2000):

1. Jews and Christians worship the same G-d.
2. Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book — the Bible (what Jews call “Tanakh” and Christians call the “Old Testament”).
3. Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel.
4. Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah.
5. Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.
6. The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until G-d redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture.
7. A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice.

8. Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.

The Matzevah Foundation

I lead The Matzevah Foundation (TMF), a tax-exempt, 501 (C) (3), non-profit corporation recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a public charity. The genesis of TMF began as an extension of the partnership that I established with the Polish Jewish community of Warsaw in 2005 and continues today albeit in a different form through TMF. My work with the Jewish community arose from living and working in Poland for twelve years with the Baptist Union of Poland as a pastor tasked to lead and strengthen Baptist churches.

In leading TMF, I have begun a PhD in Leadership and plan to complete my dissertation in the context of my work in 2016. To this end, I have been working diligently toward developing and deepening my understanding of cross-cultural diversity issues concerning the Jewish worldview and issues related to Jewish and Christian interaction, so that I might become a more competent, cross-cultural leader.

I am working as a Christian with the global Jewish community of Polish descent interacting with Jews from Poland, Israel, Australia and the United States. I have been working successfully in this context for nearly ten years. I am accepted by the Polish Jewish community in Poland; however, in the United States, I do not enjoy the same level of trust and acceptance.

I am not seeking to open an inter-faith dialogue with the Jewish community; although quite invaluable, it is beyond the scope of my work.

Instead, as a servant who leads a public charity, I am attempting to broaden and deepen the dialogue that I already have with the Jewish community so that TMF may effectively realize its two-fold mission: to educate the public about the Shoah and to care for and restore Jewish cemeteries in Poland. Through remembering and caring for desolate and forgotten Jewish cemeteries in Poland, I lead TMF and others to honor the memory and celebrate the lives of normal, everyday Polish Jews, who lost their lives in the Shoah. It is my desire to reconcile the broken relationship that exists between Jew and Christian through interacting directly in a common mitzvah of caring.

Why is caring for the Jewish cemeteries of Poland important to The Matzevah Foundation?

Board members of TMF are not Jewish, so caring for Jewish cemeteries is not obligatory. Nevertheless, we realize the importance of this mitzvah and are driven by *gemilut chasadim*, “the giving of loving-kindness” as our motivation to care for abandoned and desolate Jewish cemeteries in Poland.

We also realize that caring for the Jewish cemeteries in Poland is important to the Jew, first, due to the *Halakhah*, as the Torah teaches and as the rabbis teach us in the Talmud. We know that caring for the dead is one of the highest expressions of *chesed*, loving-kindness, as the dead cannot repay us or anyone for the loving-kindness shown to them.

From first-hand experience, we know that caring for these cemeteries is an overwhelming task for the Polish Jewish community but doing so is a mitzvah. Nonetheless it is an opportunity for TMF to break the cycle of evil and thereby open a path that leads to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in *The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement*:

“There is immense silent agony in the world, and *the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor*, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty. The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what *the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings*, that *indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.*”

I believe, that we are collectively responsible to speak for those who no longer have a voice, those, who suffered and died at the hand of their oppressors during the Shoah. We celebrate their memory and act to honor it.

I appeal therefore to you asking you to consider how you might cooperate with The Matzevah Foundation in its work for three reasons.

1. As stated above, doing so would be a mitzvah; it could be a cooperative and mutual mitzvah.
2. We would be acting justly, and demonstrating mercy, as the Prophet Micah proclaimed and become the voice for those silenced by the Shoah.
3. It would be an opportunity for us to engage in constructive dialogue based on *Dabru Emet*.

We know that the Talmud considers compassion to be “the hallmark of an ethical person” and it “is *the* defining characteristic of being a Jew” (Rabbi Telushkin, 2006, p. 20).

Let us compassionately consider how we might act justly and faithfully with regards to this matter. May G-d be gracious to us and may he enable us to walk this path together, confronting and “giving attention to the transcendent meaning” of our “actions” as Rabbi Heschel taught, and thereby determine how we might best cooperate and speak to the injustice of the Shoah today.

About the Author

Steven D. Reece worked as an award-winning, photojournalist before entering religious and charitable work. Steven served as a pastor in Poland working with the Baptist Union of Poland. He currently leads The Matzevah Foundation, Inc. (TMF), a non-profit organization founded by a group of Christians. TMF’s objectives include acting justly by educating the public about the Shoah and its impact on Jews of Polish descent as well as showing mercy by remembering, preserving, and honoring the Jewish heritage of Poland through caring for and restoring Jewish cemeteries.

The Matzevah Foundation cooperates closely with the Jewish Community of Poland and the Rabbinical Council for Matters of Jewish Cemeteries in caring for and restoring Jewish cemeteries. Presently, TMF is leading four major Jewish cemetery restoration projects in Poland in partnership with the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, the City of Zambrów, Poland, the Jewish community of Katowice, Poland and the Auschwitz Jewish Center (an affiliate of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City).

Steven is married and he and his wife Deborah have four children: Zach (28), Aaron (26), Rebekah (22) and John (15). Steven and Deborah are active members of a local Baptist church.

Steven is a graduate of Baylor University, in Waco, Texas with a Bachelor's of Science degree in Biology and earned a Master's of Divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Presently, Steven is a candidate for the PhD in Leadership at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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