Germany and Tshuvah

Rabbi David J. Fine

Yom Kippur Day
Temple Israel, 2010

The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the time when we are supposed to work hard at tying up the loose knots that we did not get to earlier, so that we appear on Yom Kippur as complete and whole as possible. These days for me this year have been extraordinary in a personal way because I completed the filing of my doctoral dissertation at the CUNY Graduate Center. (A long and tortuous and quite judgmental process is now complete.) Whenever I tell people that my doctorate is in German history, that I am interested in the experience of German Jewry, the response is invariably, "Oh, did you have family from Germany?" Or I should say that is the response of the Jewish people I speak with. Why else would a Jew, a rabbi at that, be interested in German history? The answer, by the way, is no. I do not have any personal roots in Germany. All four of my grandparents were born in the United States—three of them in Brooklyn—and my great grandparents all came from eastern Europe. But since I have just completed what has been a long personal journey over many years, I would like to take a point of personal privilege and talk about something that is close to my heart, my relationship to and feelings about Germany. I will then conclude with some perhaps controversial thoughts about repentance and forgiveness. What I am going to say may make some people uncomfortable, and may even be offensive to some, and for that I apologize. But on this day we are supposed to be uncomfortable. We are supposed to afflict our souls.

As you know from this week's mail, I am teaching a course here on Sunday mornings on German Jewish history, which will culminate in a trip to Germany. I have been to Germany a dozen times before. I began studying the German language in my second year of college, and attended two intensive language courses in Germany. I am fluent and comfortable enough that I can wander the streets of a German city without being identified as a tourist. But why? There are still many Jews today who will not consider stepping foot in Germany, or even pronounce a German word for that matter. Why have I?

When my interest in Germany began in college it had nothing to do with the Holocaust. As a term paper for a history seminar in my sophomore year at Wesleyan I wrote about the intellectual origins of Conservative Judaism, origins which lay in Germany. This led to an interest in the development of the various modern forms of Judaism in nineteenth century Germany, something those of you who take the Sunday morning course will learn all about! The only formal course I took that was fully devoted to the history of German Jewry was taught by a German Jewish émigré, Evyatar Friesel, in Hebrew at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where I spent my junior year of college. I also took second-year German that year in a course taught in Hebrew by an Israeli. Perhaps it was because I was introduced to Germany and German Jewry in Israel and in Hebrew, that I felt safe, that it felt "kosher."

It was on my way back from my junior year in Israel that I visited Germany for the first time, for one week. My next trip, a few years later, was for a two month summer intensive language course, a course I was urged to take by none less than the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, then Ismar Schorsch. Professor Schorsch, himself

born in Germany and the son of a German Jewish rabbi, encouraged me in my studies when I was still at Wesleyan, spending my senior year writing my honors thesis on Leopold Zunz, a leading nineteenth century German Jewish scholar. It was during my first year in rabbinical school that he insisted I spend the summer in Germany.

While Professor Schorsch wanted me to follow my initial interests in the intellectual origins of Conservative Judaism, my own interests moved on from religious intellectual history to the social history of German Jewry. My dissertation was on the experience of Jewish soldiers in the German army in World War I. Where did that come from? Somewhat by chance.

A little over nine years ago, I spent another two-month summer in Germany, this time on the heels of my ordination as a rabbi. Another intensive language course and a month of touring. One July afternoon, passing the hours after class, I was browsing in a used bookstore in Frankfurt and came across this old green volume [*hold up the Gedenkbuch*]. Published by what was essentially the Jewish war veterans of Germany, but in 1932, it is a memorial volume of all the Jewish soldiers who died in service to their country during World War I. There are roughly twelve thousand names in this volume, each carefully given with dates of birth and death, city of residence, rank and division. Paul von Hindenburg, the German president who fatefully appointed Hitler as chancellor only five months later, wrote and signed a preface. This is an important artifact from the period of the Nazi rise to power. While under siege by the barbarically antisemitic Nazis, here the Jews were proudly defending themselves in print, defending the record that far from being responsible for Germany's loss in the Great War, the Jews served their country, and died alongside their non-Jewish comrades.

Just next to this extraordinary volume I found another book, a beautiful slim volume [*hold up Kriegsbriefe*], with an etching in the front cover by Max Liebermann of a mother crying over her fallen son's empty bed, the German flag draped above her. This book, also published by the Jewish war veterans, is called *War Letters of Fallen German Jews.* And this book was published in 1935, two years after the Nazis came to power. These two books, German Jewish patriotic volumes published under the shadow of the Nazis, besides catching my attention and setting me out on an intellectual journey that culminated in my dissertation on Jews in the German army in World War I, initially underlined several ideas for me that have been crucial in my thinking about Germany and the Holocaust:

- That the Jews were not complacent as Hitler came onto the scene. The myth of Jews walking in line to the gas chambers without ever raising a finger is untrue. The Jews in Germany knew Hitler for the antisemite that he was, and appealed to the wider German people to reject his hatred. They should not be blamed for failing to "read the handwriting on the wall."
- That the Holocaust was not inevitable, it was not the destiny of Germany, a place, allegedly, where Jews were always hated and never secure. Things could have gone differently.
- That the Jews of Germany loved Germany.

That last point, that the Jews of Germany loved Germany, was a very significant lesson. I had first heard it from Paul Mendes-Flohr, another Hebrew University professor whom I also studied with in Jerusalem but first met during my college sophomore year when he gave a series of lectures on German Jewry at Yale. I attended those lectures, as Yale is

less than half an hour from Wesleyan, lectures which Mendes-Flohr concluded with a haunting tale of Leo Baeck, the leading rabbi of German Jewry at the time of the Holocaust. He told us that Leo Baeck, who combined Jewish and Western learning, had a discipline of beginning each day with the study of a page of Talmud in the original Aramaic, and a page of Greek tragedy, Sophocles or Euripedes, in the original Greek. But when he was finally arrested by the Nazis and sent to Theresienstadt, Baeck put the Talmud and the Greek tragedies aside, and instead spent time each morning reading a page of Goethe and a page of Schiller, classics of German literature. Baeck's ritual was a protest to himself as much as to those around him: now the Nazis were destroying the beautiful German culture. Leo Baeck and the persecuted Jewish minority had to keep that heritage alive because all those who supported the Nazis were contributing to its destruction.

What an extraordinary moral, that rather than see himself as the victim of German culture, Leo Baeck saw himself as its protector during dark times. That story, which I heard before my first trip to Germany, challenged me to think about Germany in positive light. Rather than only see concentration camps, I should look as well for what was it about this culture, this place, that the Jews loved so much.

And so when I spent time in Germany that was what I looked for. And it was often difficult. After visiting Dachau outside Munich, my language class was having a German conversation, for purposes of practicing our German as well as covering this important element of German history, about the Holocaust. The class consisted of about twenty students from countries all over the world, and I almost felt sorry for the tall blond-haired German man, Johannes, who, following the curriculum, had to facilitate this

student conversation as we struggled to find the words to say what we were thinking. The class knew that I was a rabbinical studnet, needless to say the only Jew, and when it was my turn to speak I found the German words flow out of my mouth. *Für mich,* I said in my elementary German, *ist Deutschland ein Land von Blut.* For me, Germany is a land of blood. That was probably a conversation stopper, but I don't remember what happened next. Only that I needed to get that off my chest, and let Johannes dare correct my grammar!

As I later learned, I was expressing a view that is held by many Germans, that it is impossible to think about Germany without seeing its dark past. In any major German city you can walk into a bookstore and buy a guidebook for the city as it was in the Third Reich. This is not neo-Nazi kitsch, but rather a sincere attempt to remember the dark shadows that lie behind every street corner. One cannot walk two blocks in Germany without finding some kind of Holocaust memorial. Unlike any other country, Germany is practically obsessed with dealing with the Nazi past. The federal memorial to the murdered Jews, which sits a few yards away from the Brandenberg Gate and the parliament building in Berlin, has been remarked by Jewish architectural historian James Young as the only example of a government building a memorial to its own victims. An analogy might if there were a federal memorial to the destroyed native American culture on the National Mall in Washington, and there is none.

And so, despite my outburst in class in a small Bavarian town in the summer of 1995, I asked more of myself. Challenged by Mendes-Flohr's story of Leo Baeck, I squinted, trying to find the beautiful land beneath the blood, the land that the Jews loved. I gave myself permission to find wonderful things in Germany. I thought I needed to in

order to restore the honor of those who fought for their country in World War I, and who were wrongly persecuted and murdered in the Holocaust. The Nazis had to have been wrong. The Jews did belong in Germany. It was their beloved country. I needed to not deny that to their memory. I wanted to restore their belongingness.

Today, although many Jews remain uncomfortable even visiting Germany, Germany's is the fastest growing Jewish population in the world. This is because of the influx of Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union. Ex-Soviet Jews who could not get into the United States and did not want to go to Israel, or wanted to stay in Europe, have settled in Germany. While they are chiefly attracted by Germany's open-door policy for Jewish immigration, they have repopulated the synagogues that the Nazis destroyed, and that have been restored by atoning Germans. The voices of Jewish children can be heard in the halls of the Jewish communities again. Jewish life has returned.

And so why the discomfort of so many? Because Germany is a land flowing with blood. And because it is difficult to forgive.

A decade ago I used to officiate at high holiday services with the late Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, in a small service for friends and family of Edgar Bronfman Sr. I remember how Rabbi Hertzberg, may he rest in peace, would rant and rave about the Church and about the Germans, about how he could not forgive what had been done to the Jews. That only the direct victims themselves had the right to even consider forgiveness, not Jews a generation or so later living on our shores. Rabbi Hertzberg was articulating a position that is held by many, and not without merit, that the Jewish community today simply does not have the right, even if it wanted, to forgive those who

wronged us in the past. The issue of forgiveness of Germany resurfaces all the time. From the founding days of the State of Israel, when David Ben-Gurion chose to accept German reparations, to the just-opened New Meadowlands Stadium, which is called that because two years ago the Giants and the Jets opted to break off plans with the German insurance firm Allianz for corporate sponsorship of what would have been called Allianz Stadium. Too many in the New York and New Jersey area voiced their discomfort with the idea of the new football stadium being named for an insurance firm that cooperated with the Nazis during the Holocaust in turning Jewish life insurance premiums over to the government, and itself insuring Auschwitz. A significant debate was developing in the Jewish press over whether or not Allianz should be permitted to name the new stadium here. Had it not performed numerous acts of contrition since the Holocaust? That is, had it not performed *teshuvah,* repentance? Could we not forgive a corporate entity that is run today by people who were either not yet born or only young children in the Nazi era, and who have committed themselves to repudiating what their company did in the past? Some argued that they should name the stadium, and build a Holocaust memorial right next to it, although that might have spoiled the mood of many a tailgater. The most convincing argument against the sponsorship was not ethical or even logical, but simply emotional. It would simply be too painful, the plea was, for Jews to see that name on the stadium every time they drive up and down the New Jersey Turnpike.

In Germany itself there is no luxury of avoiding a confrontation with the past. It is painful, and it is always there. Struggling with the past is a major issue that is inscribed on the topography of contemporary Germany. Anyone who has been to Germany can feel that. I know of no other example in history of a nation that holds its

own recent history in such utter contempt, as a dark evil cloud that brought so much suffering and destruction. From the federal level to small towns, from parliament sessions to middle school class projects, Germany is obsessed with "coming to terms with the past," what we might call tshuvah. But what I have come to realize, through all my time and travels in Germany, is that most of these acts of public memory and contrition are not for us. Berlin's federal Holocaust memorial and its Jewish museum, places we will visit on our trip next month, were not built for Jewish visitors, or for the growing but still relatively small Jewish community in Germany. They are for themselves. Tshuvah, repentance, is first of all an existential process. How can I change my ways, and turn around in a new direction, repair myself before God? Even if there were not a single Jew in Germany, synagogues ought still be restored, memorials and museums still built.

But there are Jews. There are still two parties. Our tradition teaches us that when we wrong another we need not only repent before God, but also ask forgiveness from the one we have wronged. That is what we are taught to do all the time, and especially today. More specifically, according to Jewish law, when one physically injures another person, one must not only pay compensatory damages, one must also seek forgiveness. In the words of Rabbi Elliot Dorff, expert of Jewish ethics and chairman of the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, "It is not only the injury that must be repaired, but the relationship" [*To Do the Right and the Good,* p. 189]. Reconcilation must be sought. "This imposes a reciprocal obligation on the wronged party" as Rabbi Dorff continues. "He or she, when asked for forgiveness, must forgive." Many are familiar with the halakhah that if we ask for forgiveness and it is not procured we must ask again, up to three times. "Injured parties who refused [to forgive] even

when asked three times in the presence of others are, in turn, deemed to have sinned. They are called cruel." We are supposed to be forgiving, just as God is forgiving. But Rabbi Dorff goes on to acknowledge that "this does not mean that people who have been wronged are supposed to squelch their feelings of anger." When we forgive, that does not mean that we forget, nor that the pain is gone.

When my boys fight, which they do as they are brothers, we always have them apologize to each other. One says "I'm sorry" and than hovers in a kind of holding pattern until the other says "it's okay." When that does not follow, he turns to me or Alla and says of his brother, "He didn't say it's okay!" Which is always followed by our saying to the other brother, "Say it's okay!" "It's okay." Followed by hugs.

Young children have a remarkable ability to let things go. You can kiss a boo-boo and it doesn't hurt anymore. Injuries are more painful when we get older. What Rabbi Dorff is teaching us is that forgiving does not mean that one must renounce one's pain. The pain is real and should be acknowledged. Rather, forgiveness is about reconciliation. It is about moving a relationship forward.

Rabbi Dorff acknowledges that there is a difference between individuals forgiving individuals and nations forgiving other nations. God commands us in the Torah never to forget what Amalek did to us. Generations of Jews have seen that paragraph in the Torah as license for vigilant hatred of all non-Jews as potential Amalekites. At least, in the context of Germany, it is used as support for the position of never forgetting and never forgiving. But there are other models in the Bible. This afternoon we will read the Book of Jonah. As Rabbi Dorff explains, "The Rabbis probably chose this book for reading on Yom Kippur for its assurance that repentance can procure God's mercy, but it is striking

that the example of repentance is specifically a nation, and a non-Jewish one at that….One must remember…that Ninevah was the capital of Assyria, which had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and has besieged Jersusalem" [pp. 192-193]. Jonah the prophet tried to run away from God's message, since he hated Assyria so much. And yet even Assyria, the nation that was responsible for the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, the nation who scattered the "the Lost Tribes," can still do tshuvah.

Whereas Arthur Hertzberg said that we can never forgive, Elliot Dorff suggests, even if tentatively, that we should. The question turns of course on what we really mean when we say "forgive." One last quotation from Rabbi Dorff: "Forgiveness does not expunge memory of the event; it also does not eliminate moral culpability….God may "wipe clean" our sins, perhaps now motivated by prayer, repentance and good deeds as the High Holy Day liturgy maintains, but human beings do not. When one human being forgives another, the victim agrees to engage in present and future relationships with the perpetrator *despite* the wrong committed; the act itself continues to be considered wrong by the victim—and, if the process of repentance works, by the perpetrator too" [p. 199].

We must not mitigate the pain of the past, and we must surely not forget. But forgive, in the sense of accepting and acknowledging genuine tshuvah, is, in my opinion, a worthy act. Tshuvah and forgiveness are about moving forward, finding a way to live with our hurts and pains as we begin a new year.

Studying German history, as I do, means that I am destined to always be thinking about, be living with, the hurt of the past. While Holocaust history and German history are not the same thing, it is impossible to study German history without dealing with the Nazis. Historians of Germany divide into two camps, those who believe, on the one

hand, that the handwriting was always on the wall, that Nazism was the inevitable result of a history filled with nationalist hatreds, antisemitism, autocratic government and a socially divided social structure where moderating voices were written out of power, and on the other hand, those who believe that things could have happened differently, that Germany is not inherently less democratic or more antisemitic than other nations. The first theory is called the *Sonderweg,* or "special path," that Germany had its own special path, one that led to Hitler. The other is often called, for lack of a better term, the anti-Sonderweg theory. Many Jews feel very strongly about the Sonderweg approach, that Germany was a unique hell for Jews, and that we in hindsight can see all the steps and all the developments that those who lived there at the time could not. That same year, my junior year abroad, that I studied German Jewish history in Hebrew from a German Jewish émigré at the Hebrew University, that German-accented Hebrew, saw the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners.* Some of you have perhaps seen that book. Pursuing a classic *Sonderweg* approach, Goldhagen argues that even ordinary Germans, not just the Nazi leaders, were driven by a deep-rooted antisemitism that had flourished in Germany since the nineteenth century.

I remember browsing through his argument at a bookstore in Jerusalem. I really dislike that book. Besides the fact that I find his basic argument unconvincing, I am bothered, morally bothered, by the idea that a certain nation, a certain people, could be more "evil" than another. My own work is devoted to making a small dent into the Sonderweg thesis, arguing that antisemitism was not such a unique problem for German Jews in World War I. I sometimes have to stop myself, and wonder why I go to such lengths to defend the German record. That is, the pre-Nazi record. Why am I so

concerned to show that the Holocaust was not pre-ordained to occur, was not necessarily the destiny of Germany?

I have thought long and hard about this question many times, and these are my motivations:

- Firstly, I want to defend the honor and the memory of German Jewry. The Holocaust was not their fault, and we should not blame them for failing to see warning signs. As angry as we are against the Nazis, we must avoid blaming the victim. The German Jews who believed that Hitler was just a passing fad might have been correct, had things happened differently, which they could have.
- Secondly, I want to show that antisemitism, that vehement irrational hatred and the persecution and ultimately genocide that come from it, is not *sui generis* to Germany. Hatred of Jews is not a specifically German phenomenon. Unfortunately, we have found enemies all over the place in every generation in our long history. The Holocaust was not committed solely by Germans. It was committed by human beings. The Nazis found no lack of willing collaborators in other occupied countries. More importantly, the Holocaust could have happened elsewhere, I believe. What is most scary to me about the Holocaust is not even that it happened but that it could happen, that human beings could do such a thing. I have no illusions that human beings could do such a thing again, and indeed there have been other genocides, both before and since.

Therefore, for me, understanding Germany, and I mean really understanding it in the sense of realizing that things could have happened differently, that Germans as Germans are not evil devils walking the earth, is morally significant. To do otherwise, to say that it's because they are German, that there is something evil about Germany, is to fail, in my mind, to truly understand the nature of evil in the world. Rather than dismiss evil, as "well, that's Germany," we need to understand that humans can do terrible things to each other. All humans can. The terrible truth about the Holocaust is not that the Nazis did it, but that human beings did it. We need to move past the feelings of vengeance towards a particular country, currently run and inhabited by people who were not around to have been perpetrators, and who are seeking friendship with Israel and the Jewish people. That is, who are seeking tshuvah, repentance. No one is saying that the terrible things should be forgotten, but to heal the world, to do a real *tikkun olam,* we must move beyond condemnation towards reconciliation.

I will be participating in an important symbolic gesture in this regard next week. I have been invited to attend the ceremony where Angela Merkel will be awarded the Leo Baeck Institute's Leo Back Medal. The medal has been awarded since 1978 by the organization committed to the preservation of the heritage of German Jewry to an individual distinguished for special effort in German-Jewish reconciliation. This is the first time that the medal is being given to a German chancellor. The significance of that cannot be understated, for Chancellor Merkel holds the same office as the one most responsible for the Holocaust. Her relationship with the Jewish community is a reflection of how times have changed.

I conclude with one more personal story, a story that I told here at the Holocaust memorial service last spring, so some of you may remember it. In the summer of 1999, travelling around Germany just after my ordination as a rabbi, I visited the great cathedral of Cologne, one of the most impressive neo-Gothic cathedrals in the world. My guidebook told me that along the wall in the chancel at the front of the cathedral there is a medieval stone upon which is inscribed in Latin the permission by the bishop for Jews to settle in that area of the Rhineland. (I will show this to our group when we visit Cologne next spring.) I wanted to see it, although the whole front of the cathedral was closed except for worshippers doing confession. I approached a priest walking past in his long ecclesiastical robes, told him in German that I was a rabbi, and wanted to see the medieval bishop's inscription about the Jews on the wall just on the other side of the closed-off area. *Aber natürlich, Herr Rabbiner!* he replied. "But of course, Herr Rabbi." I had only been a rabbi for a month or so then, so I really appreciated the deference of being called "Herr Rabbiner." But it was more than that. There, in a grand German cathedral, the priest moved the divider aside, respecting the rabbi as a fellow cleric, and invited the rabbi into the inner sanctum, to examine the invitation of another cleric, centuries ago, for the Jews to live peacefully with the Christians in Germany. That was reconciliation, a restored relationship, real teshuvah.