

On the wall outside the sanctuary there hangs a painting in a frame it most certainly does not deserve. A large, wooden construction, the frame holds its treasure a good six inches away from the mounting's base where a mirror reflects quite inconveniently the reverse side of the canvas. Passersby would hardly notice even the bulky frame. But when you begin to consider why the picture is mounted on a mirror you realize that it is what's behind the painting that matters.

Rabbi Zoltan Radnoti saw the painting on an internet auction and took a gamble based on an apparent oddity in the thumbnail image. He thought he could make out the shapes of letters behind this still-life illustration of a flower bouquet. He won the auction and would soon know with certainty what was behind the artwork.

When the painting arrived, Rabbi Radnoti examined the back only to discover that he was holding a section of a Torah scroll which had been used as scrap canvas for this artist's design. By installing it as he did at Bet Shalom—his neolog (traditional conservative) synagogue in suburban Budapest—Rabbi Radnoti preserved the memory of the desecration of Eastern European Jewry in the heart of his thriving young synagogue, a paradox that affirms the renewed vibrancy of the Jews of Europe.

That's right. Despite what history books record and what headlines claim, Europe is not the graveyard of the Jewish people.

In the first week of June, my wife Adina and I had the pleasure of joining the Gladstein Fellowship in Entrepreneurial Leadership and Masorti Olami on a mission to several Jewish communities in Europe. Bet Shalom was only one of such communities in Budapest, as well as nearly half a dozen others in Paris and London.

Masorti Olami is the umbrella organization for positive historical Judaism worldwide. The Masorti communities they support parallel the philosophies and Jewish practices of our own Conservative synagogue here in the United States. The Jewish movements of Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and others are mainly an American phenomenon. Even the label Orthodox is unique to this part of the world; to be what we call an orthodox Jew in Europe, South America, Australia, even in Israel is referred to there simple as traditional, observant.

But more and more there are Jews in the world seeking a way of being Jewish that both preserves tradition and allows for modernity, which stands equally in the past and the present, inspired equally by our ancient texts and our enlightened ideas. These communities have emerged out of the ashes of European Jewish destruction to build vibrant Jewish centers in the most unlikely places, like Budapest, where the holocaust hit violently in only a short period at the end of the war.

As we stood there in front of this painting at Bet Shalom, I felt bothered by how it had been framed. It seemed that any frontward-faced framing of this painting in some way allows viewers to take in the beauty of the artwork at the expense of the desecration it caused. Should not the painting have faced the mirror, showing off the Torah scroll in all *its* beauty and revealing behind it the painting that had attempted to subvert our tradition?

This tension is what communities like Bet Shalom are grappling with, and in cities such as Budapest, Paris, London, Valencia, Brussels, Berlin, Stockholm, Prague, and others. On this trip Adina and I had the pleasure of spending a few days with the Masorti Jewish communities in Budapest, Paris, and London in particular, where we learned about their origins, their

development, and the challenges presented by the current political and historical climates in their regions.

In Budapest we saw the lasting effects of the brief but vicious holocaust. In a city where 600,000 Jews were slaughtered by the Hungarian government before even being transported to Nazi death camps, it is a surprise that the Dohany Street Synagogue or the Jewish Theological Seminary are still standing today. In a city where Jews were shot in droves into the Danube River, it is miraculous to see young Jews banding together to create a safe haven for Jewish youth self-expression. The Aurora House is a project of Marom, the young adult branch of the Masorti movement, in which 50-60 Jews in their early 20s have created a cultural center, prayer space, and social activist hub for the growing young Jewish community in the city. We had dinner with a number of these entrepreneurs and were blown away by their dedication and success at building a culture of voluntarism in such a short time. As our own Conservative movement continues to strategize ways to engage the college and post-grad populations in our vibrant Jewish regions, Marom has fostered Jewish passion in the most unlikely of places.

Paris revealed a France still facing anti-Semitism in a palpable way. Late at night we stood together outside the Hyper Cacher, that kosher market no larger than Seasons which months ago was attacked by terrorists. Peering over the barricades past the banners, candles, and prayers left in solidarity by international visitors, surrounded by armed guards, we joined together in the memorial El Malei prayer and Hatikvah, adding our own wishes for peace to the memorial. And yet the Parisian Jewish community is vibrant. Hundreds of thousands of Jews fill synagogues throughout Paris; the kosher shawarma in Le Marais is some of the best I've had in my travels; and Paris accounts for one of the largest concentrations of Jews in the world. Adat Shalom, a Masorti community in downtown Paris, is an exemplar of entrepreneurial work and rapid engagement of the local community.

We concluded our trip with Shabbat in London, together as a mission along with members of the Masorti and Marom communities we met along the way who had gathered in London for a Masorti Olami and Marom conference. The New North London Synagogue, led for several decades by the inspiring Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg and now also by a former Gladstein Fellow, Rabbi Roni Tabick, is the epitome of communal leadership, Jewish engagement, and a *hamish* experience. With 1200 member families, NNLS is larger than most Conservative synagogues in the United States and has more *ruach*, spirit, in its walls than many communities I have seen of any denomination. Despite England's own history of anti-semitism, particularly at the turn of the 20th century, NNLS is a bastion of Jewish life, making it the perfect host for our Shabbat gathering.

On Saturday evening before a *havdalah* that can't be done before 10:30pm in England's summer months, we had the chance to hear from each representative of the Masorti communities in eight countries about their synagogue's origin story, development, and current challenges. The same theme ran throughout: European Jewry is thriving, and Masorti Judaism all the more so. In the US I have been raised to believe that outside of Israel the United States is the only hopeful place to be a Jew. Even as a rabbinical student I have learned this fact argued by numerous scholars on the subject of Modern Jewish history, who suggest that Europe destroys Jews, even as it has made room for the greatest intellectual and cultural developments of Judaism's long life.

But I believe that history is truly a thing of the past. While in Budapest we took a trip across the Danube River to see Buda Castle, giving us a spectacular panorama of the city of Pest opposite the river. From our lookout you could faintly identify the outline of the city's famous Holocaust

memorial of iron shoes on the opposite bank of the Danube, representing those lives which were ended on those very shores during the war. Reflecting back on that image I feel like I have seen what the Israelites saw once they had crossed the Red Sea. Exodus 14:30 says *וירא ישראל את מצרים מת על שפת הים*, which translates roughly as “Then Israel saw Egypt dead on the shore of the sea.” I say roughly because, as commentators have dissected for many generations, there are some ambiguities about this verse that make its comprehension challenging. What does the text mean when it says they saw Egypt dead? Surely a country can’t be seen dead in the context that this story intends. Is the word “Egypt” shorthand for “Egyptians”? But how could it be that the Israelites saw the Egyptians dead on the shore, when the preceding verse explained that the waters came back over Egypt and they drowned? Were they in the water, or were they on the shore? Rabbi Samuel the son of Meir (Rashbam), the grandson of Rashi, explained that the syntax is switched around. We should read this as “Then the Israelites, while standing on the shore of the sea, saw the Egyptians dead [in the sea].” But a later scholar, Jacob Tzvi Mecklenburg, said the punctuation of the sentence negates this possible reading.

My own understanding of the text demands, like Mecklenburg, that we read the text precisely as it is printed. And at the same time there are words that may mean something a bit different from what we see before us. I believe that when the text says “on the shore of the sea,” it does not refer to Israel but rather, as the punctuation suggests, Egypt. At the same time, I agree that it is problematic for the Egyptians to be on the shore when the text just explained that they had drowned. So Egypt can’t mean the Egyptians, but rather precisely the word itself: *mitzrayim*, a narrow, dire place. The image the Torah is depicting is clear and vivid: Israel has just come through the greatest ordeal of its history, and now turning around they can see their past reality dead on the opposite shore of the sea. Egypt, that narrow strait of their past afflictions, is in fact dead and on the shore of the sea they left behind. Ahead of them is the vibrancy of a new Jewish community, in many ways a return to the land of their ancestors and in many ways an entirely new look at how Jewish life is lived in the desert. They are to become a holy nation of priests, a nation that seeks new truth, and a nation that will soon rebuild itself to a form it could never have imagined. As the commentator Isaac Abarbanel explained, there could only be salvation for the Israelites once they could visualize their past behind them as they did on that day.

Such is the story of European Jewry and its revival in the Masorti communities around the continent. Such was my experience on the bank of the Danube, seeing the shoes across the river and knowing of the triumphs of Hungary’s Jews only decades after the massacres that occurred there.

This, I believe, is why that painting is framed as it is. It is not that the mounting promotes our destruction. On the contrary, behold the beauty that has emerged despite our destruction. In that painting we stare destruction in the face and know it is on the other shore. Even when anti-semitism presents itself in a Paris supermarket, Parisian Jews live strong in their pursuit of a more peaceful religious existence.

As the president of Masorti Olami asserted at the conclusion of our Shabbat together in London, Europe is not the graveyard of the Jewish People.

Please join me in supporting those inspiring Masorti Olami communities in Europe and around the world, and in learning from what they do to make our own community a more vibrant Jewish home.