

FRANKENAU:A 48 HOUR SACRED MOMENT IN TIME

In a penetrating book entitled *The Sabbath*, Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel divides our lives into two worlds; a world of space and a world of time. We spend the bulk of our lives, according to Heschel in the world of space- in the world of material things, concerned as we are during the work week with the physical world, with survival, with the world of things. But on Shabbat we should enter a world of time, a world concerned with the spirit, with thoughts as far removed as life will permit from the humdrum world of the business week- we should enter, according to Heschel , a sacred moment in time. But it is not a depressing world . Quite to the contrary it is a joyous, pleasurable world, a world of the senses as well in which not only reflection but celebration is the order of the day. The entire experience is meant to refresh us for the more difficult world of things we are about to reenter when it ends.

I am not an observant Jew, at least not in the Orthodox or traditional sense. But I feel that my wife , my daughter and I have just lived though a 48 hour sacred moment in time , a moment that Heschel would have embraced. It happened in the middle of the week .It happened in the tiny rural town of Frankenau Germany. And it happened this way.

We had only recently experienced the compelling Holocaust Memorial completed last year in the heart of Berlin by Architect Peter Eisenman. It is vast , spanning as it does an entire city block filled with 2117 dark concrete blocks. It is treacherous- as you enter the blocks are hardly knee high but the path on which you walk begins to recede and the dark blocks rise higher and soon you are deep in a dark forest of concrete-you can see the outside world but it seems unreachable. The Holocaust experience which it seeks to recreate remains inexplicable, a dark foreboding unfathomable void. Its impact dwarfs that of any other human experience and

the few triumphs over the impact of the death and desolation that it spawned are often insignificant compared to its enormity. But a certain few of these triumphs shine with an unparalleled brilliance by virtue of their stark contrast to the endless void of darkness they contest. The return of an undersized torah to the tiny Hessian town of Frankenau was such a triumph- for it was a triumph of the spirit of unmercifully persecuted men and women who risked life itself to rescue a handwritten scroll – a scroll which dared to proclaim that man was indeed created in God’s image and that life is not meaningless- that there are God-given laws that man must live by.

My wife , my daughter and I stood on a grassy hilltop overlooking a beautiful green valley , far above the red rooftops of the little village. We carried a century-old torah. The clouds which had threatened all the way from Frankfurt had suddenly dissipated revealing a beautifully blue sky. As we stood there, bells began to ring out from the steeple of a church which rose in the midst of the red roofs far below; the steeple seemed to hover over the village like a protective parent. The bell sounds though distant now penetrated the valley. I recalled the bells which rang at vespers at Christ Church College, Oxford when my son had attended. It was about that time of day, I thought. Karl Herman Voelker with whom I had been trading e-mails since learning of a history of the Jews of Frankenau prepared by a predecessor historian, had now come up from Frankenau to meet us. He urged us to hurry. “They’re waiting at the Church” he said. It was abruptly apparent that that the bells rang for us.

The road wove gently down the hillside and as we descended the sound of the bells grew louder. In what seemed an eternity we finally reached the outskirts of the village. The streets were curiously empty. As we drove through numerous narrow cobblestone passageways the sound of the bells reverberated even louder now bouncing off the walls of the empty red roofed

houses until finally we turned a corner and drove up toward the church. The bells were now deafening hurtling ones senses into a blur which was compounded by the scene that now spread out before us; for there arrayed among the elm trees on the gently sloping embankment in front of the church immediately above us were over 200 parishioners accompanied by a minister in full Lutheran clerical garb holding a bible and other books, the burgomeister and a 15 piece brass band .

I am a Reform Jew and rarely wear a kipah or talit - wearing them is discretionary in our Synagogue. But I felt that I was returning a torah, if only for a visit, to a community where it had been read and cherished by traditional Jews who wore these at worship and that it was incumbent upon me to wear both kipah and talit in returning the torah there. I donned both, then Susie, Debbie and I unwrapped the torah from its carrying case and I carried it up the first set of steps. As I did so, the Lutheran minister, Reverend Harald Wahl descended and whispered into my ear “You’re among friends. I have written a book on Genesis , a book on Job and I am currently writing a treatise on the Magillat Esther. My wife, Hennette Quapp, also a minister has studied Talmud in Israel”. I was speechless. The bells continued to ring and when they stopped, the band played “Hevenu Shalom Aleichem” followed by a medley of Hebrew songs. I looked up. We were surrounded by television cameras and news photographers jostling for position. To our left was a monument to the Jews of Frankenau - with letters etched on a jagged marble stone in Hebrew and German surrounding a Mogen David. “I shall give you a name for all eternity”, they read. Both the Jews and Lutherans had used the same walkway to enter their respective houses of worship. We had seen pictures of this place in the 1920’s and realized that we were virtually standing on the very ground which was once a sanctuary where the torah I was holding was read. It was a bone- chilling thought.

When the music subsided and the bells stopped , Reverend Wahl spoke in German. As he spoke, he waived a little book in the air- it was a book he had written and he spoke of the confluence of our faiths in the torah. I don't speak German but the goodwill in the tone of his voice and in his gestures was so apparent that the message was as clear as the bells that had sounded above him only moments before. He then pointed to the trees surrounding us on the little knoll. "Our two faiths", he said "may be compared to these trees. Judaism is the trunk and Christianity is a branch that could only grow out of such a solid base".

Burgermeister Kubat spoke a few words of welcome and then it was my turn. I handed the torah to Debbie. I had no prepared text but I had often thought of what I might say and now the words just poured out . I spoke in English and as I spoke Minister Wahl translated. It was helpful in speaking ex-tempore as it allowed me time between thoughts; I spoke of the fact that Susie, Debbie and I were overcome by their joyous welcome of the torah; that we were only its carriers. I explained that the torah as they knew was the first five books of the Old Testament written in hand by a scribe on sheepskin; as such it was a common heritage to be shared by Jew and Gentile alike. I pointed out that the essence of the torah was a declaration of the common humanity of all people; that early in the text we are told that all men are created in God's image and as such entitled to dignity and respect- that their presence here today was emblematic of just that spirit of humanity, a spirit that pervaded both of our great belief systems. I remembered a thought expressed so eloquently by Maurice Samuel that just as Genesis is an explosive denial of the randomness of the physical universe so the covenant at Sinai proclaimed to all mankind that life is not meaningless- and we shared that. Finally I asked emphatically that this wonderful reception be not only a memorial to the dead but an affirmation of life. That the decency and respect shown the torah here today was a celebration of man's ability to surmount darkness and

emerge into the light and that the reception they were affording the torah was itself testimony to the unifying force of this miraculous document .

When I finished, Reverend Wahl asked Susie, Debbie and me to lead a processional into the church carrying the torah which we did to the accompaniment of an organ prelude. We walked down the center aisle and up onto the alter where we sat with the torah facing the congregation. In a striking ecumenical gesture the Reverend then donned a little knitted kippah and he explained to the congregation just what and why he was doing this. His wife, Hennette, a minister on maternity leave, then read Psalm 1 in perfect Hebrew. She had carefully chosen the psalm:

“Ashrei Haeish” she read.”

“Happy is the man who has not walked in the way of the wicked,

“Nor stood in the way of sinners”

“Nor sat in the seat of the scornful”

“But his delight is in the law of the Lord;”

“And in his law does he meditate day and night.”...

“For the Lord regards the way of the righteous;”

“But the way of the wicked shall perish”.

Various members of the Congregation came forward to read Jewish prayers in German and English. It was clear that they had practiced at length for this occasion. And then it was my turn again. Rev. Wahl asked me to relate the history of the Frankenau torah. I told the tale in English pausing every other sentence or so for the Reverend to translate into German.

The story is a fascinating one. Susie’s grandfather, **Sol Katzenstein was born in Frankenau in 1870, emigrated to Texas in 1886 at a young age to join a family relation who had**

a dry goods store there and to make his way in the New World of the Far West. Sol proved to be an excellent salesman and he thrived in America where in a free market his talents were amply rewarded. Sometime in the 1920's Sol returned to Frankenau with his wife , Adele, to dedicate two sifreh torah to the little synagogue that had been erected there in 1869 right next to the church. The gesture was in honor of his parents' 50th wedding anniversary. Then came the Holocaust and Sol began to bring out the Jews of Frankenau, Frankenberg and surrounding towns by signing affidavits of support for them and then housing them in America in his home in Kew Gardens until he was able to find them positions throughout the country. The last of the survivors to come out before Kristallnacht in November 1938 smuggled out the two torahs in their furniture at the risk of their lives. In order to do so they had to cut down the torahs on the top and bottom margins of the sheepskin in order to fit them into the furniture. So the sheepskin of this torah is somewhat smaller vertically than some but its script is not incomplete in any way.

In 1938 when the survivors arrived in New York they presented the two torahs to Sol who was then President of Temple Isaiah in Forest Hills and they were then dedicated in a ceremony at Temple Isaiah which Susie's Brother Kay still remembers. The torah cover in white silk with embroidered gold letters relates this story. In 1945 120 of the survivors presented Sol with a handwritten scroll in honor of his and Adele's 50th wedding anniversary thanking them for saving their lives. Sol died in 1945, that same year; the families eventually moved away from Kew Gardens and Queens and the memory of the torahs receded for over 30 years.

In 1976 on the occasion of our son Jonathan's Bar mitzvah in Scarsdale, New York somehow Susie and I recalled the story of the torahs and decided to see if they were still around. Through Sol's Mt. Lebanon cemetery gravesite we discovered who was looking after the burial grounds formerly belonging to Temple Isaiah. We contacted the rabbi of Temple Isaiah who

confirmed that the torahs were indeed still there and that the cover of one of them still reflected the story of their dedication and provenance. Although it is rare for a congregation to allow a torah to leave the premises of the synagogue, the rabbi agreed to allow us to take that torah for our son Jonathan's Bar mitzvah. At the Bar Mitzvah there were several men crying openly. We learned later that they had read from the same torah at their Bar mitzvah in Frankenau before the Holocaust.

Almost another 30 years passed before our reconnection with the Frankenau torah. The occasions this time were the Bat Mitzvah of Debbie's eldest daughter Heather in Mamaroneck, New York followed two months later by the Bat Mitzvah of Jonathan's eldest daughter, Olivia in Westport, Connecticut. Temple Isaiah had now been merged out of existence and was part of The Reform Temple of Forest Hills. We were fortunate that Rabbi Perelmutter of that congregation had picked these torahs to keep when the merger took place. There were apparently too many torahs to fit into one ark at the time of the merger and a number were donated to other congregations. Rabbi Perelmutter had heard something about the Frankenau torahs but he didn't know exactly what- fortunately as a result of this hunch he chose to keep them. When we approached him about using one of them for Heather and Olivia's Bat Mitzvahs he agreed on condition that Susie come to speak to his congregation at a Friday night service about the provenance of the torahs. I agreed on Susie's behalf and then told her about it approaching the subject rather delicately one night at dinner. Susie panicked. But she prepared earnestly for the night and I assured her it was nothing to worry about as only a few people would show up.

I lied. What did I know? The story of the Frankenau torahs had now spread. We arrived at the temple and the sanctuary was filled to capacity. Susie, though petrified, spoke eloquently. After the ceremony she was mobbed by congregants. The parents of one couple had been saved

by Sol. They remembered that Sol and Adele had attended their parents' wedding and they pointed to their son who was about to read from the Frankenau torah next week on the occasion of his Bar Mitzvah. A congregant in his 50's told us that his Mother had been saved by Sol and that he owed his very existence to Sol since he was born here after she was brought over. Another congregant pointed to his own name and the names of his parents and many close relations on the handwritten commemorative scroll presented to Sol and Adele in 1945 which we had brought with us. He then pointed to the names of servicemen on the list who were proudly singled out on the scroll and who had been decorated with silver stars, purple hearts and other medals for bravery in action and wounds suffered in combat.

I then related how the Reform Temple of Forest Hills had only recently restored the torah and had graciously allowed us to bring it to Germany where Jonathan's second daughter, Klara, had read from it at her Bat Mitzvah only three days before at the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

As I spoke and Rev. Wahl translated, the congregants sat absorbed in the story as if they were a Jewish congregation. I then told of how we would bring the torah to Vohl tomorrow and read it in a synagogue being restored there by a retired Lutheran minister and a lay teacher named Karl Heinz Stadtler. This fact is all the more astounding as there are no Jews living in Vohl either- but a torah was now to be read there for the first time in 70 years.

When I finished, there was a spontaneous outburst of applause, unusual in a church; it was an outpouring of affection for the torah and its miraculous survival. Rev. Wahl approached to ask whether the congregants could come up to view the torah as they very much wanted to do so. I agreed but asked that he request that they not touch the torah as finger oil could eventually blur the letters. He warned them not to do so and Susie , Debbie and I then rolled open the torah. The congregants lined up and one by one, hands folded in front of them came up to gaze at the

torah. They looked at it with such awe and such reverence that it was as if they were viewing a religious shrine for the first time. I realized that my offhanded safety precaution actually had the effect of enhancing its sacredness.

Amnon Orbach, an Israeli Jew now living in the university town of Marburg had been invited to attend. He is active in Jewish community life there. Amnon approached and asked whether he could read from the torah. I agreed and he proceeded to read a few sentences from the torah portion of the week called Chukkat. I realized as he did so that this was the first time a torah had been read in Frankenau in 70 years, and remarkably it was being read in a Lutheran church.

Following the viewing of the torah the service continued as Reverend Wahl read aloud the names of all 40 Jewish Holocaust victims of Frankenau and Frankenberg who had died in the camps, listing the camps in which they had died. . Amnon then chanted the El Maaleh Rachamim (“God full of Mercy”) a prayer chanted at Jewish funerals and on Yom Kippur and other occasions of mourning and he then chanted the Kaddish . Both renditions were elegant. I suspect that Amnon may well have been a cantor at one time. The service concluded with Rev. Wahl reading the traditional rabbinic prayer (“May God Bless you and keep you etc.)in Hebrew and English and German. Susie, Debbie and I led the recessional back down the aisle with the torah to an organ solo during which the congregants accorded the torah we were carrying the respect reserved only for the most sacred of church objects.

Once out in the church front yard, Susie and I were besieged by television cameras and reporters who interviewed us at some length about what had just happened. This was then followed by a dinner for about 35 local committee members, Burgermeister Kubat, Reverend and Mrs. Wahl and a 90 year old Israeli named Bruno Frankenthal. We all spoke but then a

remarkable thing happened. Frankenthal who had been in Buchenwald ,actually led the 30 plus Germans from Frankenau who were present at the table in a rousing rendition of an old German hiking song. The melody was familiar to me . The words went like this:

“So Ein Tag

So Wunderschoen

Wie Heute.

So Ein Tag,

Der Duerfe Nie Veregeh'n”

“May a day as wonderful as this never go away”

Frankenthal who had been present at our reception earlier, was born and raised in Altenloheim a nearby village. He had attended Hebrew school in Frankenau , was rounded up as a teenager and sent to Buchenwald but fortuitously was let go on a promise that he would leave the country. Early in 1938 it was still the policy of the Nazis to encourage the Jews to emigrate. Tragically, Frankenthal saw his Hebrew teacher die in Buchenwald. Frankenthal left for Argentina and Bolivia and lived there as a tanner and leather merchant for 35 years, finally emigrating to Israel. He was visiting the region this week and was invited by Rev. Wahl to attend .At the dinner he asked whether he could say a few words and recite the ten commandments at the torah reading planned in the reconstructed Vohl synagogue the next day. I told him we would be honored for him to do so.

The day had been so exhilarating that it was difficult to sleep that night. We simply kept reliving one extraordinary experience after another in our minds. In the morning we left for Vohl

and the partially reconstructed synagogue there. The synagogue was a very simple building that would have been hard to distinguish from other houses on the street. We entered the sanctuary carrying the torah to the strains of a baroque melody played by a string and woodwind quintet. There were about 30 townspeople present in the plain square sanctuary which housed an ark up front, a table set in the middle of the room and a balcony surrounding on three sides. We laid the torah down on the plain table with a tablecloth cover and I opened it to the torah portion of the week, Chukkat. It was then that I noticed the floor beneath the table. There, beneath my feet was a memorial to Kristallnacht consisting of a see-through glass box built into the floor and containing large jagged shards of glass and a piece of wood from the original ceiling of the synagogue; on it was painted a Mogen David. I was standing on it as I read the torah. The symbolism was almost too much to process—here we were in a synagogue being lovingly restored, piece by piece by a retired Lutheran Minister and a lay teacher in a village in which there were no Jewish inhabitants and we were reading the torah there for the first time in 70 years.

I explained that the torah portion dealt with the frustration and exhaustion of the Israelites who had been wandering in the desert for almost 40 years and who beseech Moses to take them back to the land of Egypt. There is no water— and they and their cattle are dying of thirst. Moses pleads with God for help and God instructs him to speak to the rock and water will flow from it. Instead, Moses strikes the rock twice with his staff and water gushes forth. I pointed out as Karl Heinz Stadler translated, that Moses' reaction here, his defying of God's command by striking the rock perhaps as an act of disbelief or defiance is often cited as the reason that Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. There is also disagreement over its interpretation—some scholars believing that Moses was denied entry into the Promised Land

because a new generation with an entirely new outlook was needed to conquer and flourish in the new land and since Moses was the leader of a generation who could never share such an outlook he had to be left behind. I explained that while the text of the torah itself could never be changed and must be kept sacrosanct, discussion about its meaning was the essence of Judaism and was in fact, encouraged; that commentary and dialogue were essential elements of our faith.

After I read the passage, we rolled the torah from Numbers forward to Deuteronomy and Bruno Frankenthal chanted the Ten Commandments-Commandments he had learned to chant by heart as a youngster in Frankenau from his doomed Hebrew teacher. He then spoke about the torah. The townspeople sat glued as the torah was read and the commandments chanted and as Frankenthal and I spoke about the torah and its meaning. They were according the torah and the occasion the same quiet, intense reverence as had their counterparts in Frankenau. The quintet played another beautiful baroque melody as we exited with the torah into a room filled with an imaginative exhibit of art created by local artists using wood that had been salvaged from the old ceiling of the synagogue.

After lunch with the synagogue restoration committee in Vohl we returned to Frankenau for a tour on foot with the town historian. There were several highlights: the historian pointed to bronze plaques cemented in the walkways in front of a number of houses. On each plaque was printed the name of the former Jewish residents and their fate in the camps. We stopped at the house once occupied by Manus Katzenstein, Susie's great grandfather, a successful leather merchant who was a charismatic leader of the Jewish community. The house which is unique architecturally containing both a cupola and a balcony was a source of pride not only to Manus but to the whole town. It was destroyed virtually in its entirety two years ago in a fire and has now been lovingly rebuilt by its owner pretty much by hand and turned into a library and

museum. The current display consisted of Manus' letters and other Katzenstein memorabilia from the 1920's and 1930's. Our walking tour then descended to the Jewish cemetery located near the edge of town. The cemetery was in pristine condition. Some tombstones dated back to before the 18th century and were somewhat faded and moss covered but the grounds were well manicured and there was not a gravestone out of place. Susie left a small stone on the grave of her great grandfather, Manus. There were no other stones on graves there. Naturally. No Jews have lived in Frankenau or Frankenberg since the late 1930's. The reverence of this community for the Jewish dead evidenced by the care they afforded this sacred burial ground was remarkable. What proved even more remarkable was what happened next.

As we were leaving the cemetery the town historian pointed out a culvert with a small stream running alongside the street. This is where the Levis would cleanse themselves after leaving the cemetery, he said, and here- he pointed to a spot just before the entrance- here is where the Cohanim who were not permitted to enter, stopped. The knowledge, the care, the desire to know all there was to know of these people he had never known during his lifetime- was mind-numbing.

Our 48 hour stay in Frankenau ended with a coffee prepared by the Lutheran Sisterhood in a shady, tree studded little courtyard adjacent to the parish house. The coffeecake they served would have qualified for a window display in the finest gourmet New York bake shops. They were proud of their work and they wore identical multicolored scarves as emblems of their Sisterhood.

I sat there for over an hour with Rev. Wahl and we spoke of great Jewish writers such as Robert Gordis whom we both admire, and of his books on Job and Ecclesiastes and I told him of a wonderful screenplay and film called the *Quarrel* by Telushkin. I thought that a number of the

themes which Rev. Wahl had considered in analyzing the character Elihu ,the intruder, in his book on *Job* surfaced in the screenplay in the character of a student who rashly interrupts the principal characters during their debate. He was very interested and asked that I send him a copy of the play and the film. I will.

I felt we could have gone on for hours: there was so much I wanted to ask. What was he writing about Megillat Esther, the principal characters of which we had considered this year in our Talmud class. What had he written about Genesis.? But above all, how had it come to be that the people of his community and the adjacent communities we had visited had such interest and respect for Judaism. Had he instilled this in them- one man? He was after all Minister and priest combined- he had explained that there was no Catholic priest for miles and that he was called upon from time to time to fulfill the priestly function for Catholics in his area as well, often presiding at baptisms and funerals. I wondered as I left whether this remarkable and unique person could possibly have been the sole inspiration of the ecumenism which had enveloped us these past two days in two different villages. Could one lone clergyman make such an extraordinary impact? Then I remembered that he has only been there for 6 years. The Vohl synagogue project predated his arrival. And the detailed history of the Jews of Frankenau which was sent to me by the Leo Baeck Institute and which had begun our contact with this community was written by Hans Brandt, a non-Jewish Frankenau resident in the late 1980's.

I was wondering all of this and wanted to ask a thousand questions but it was time to leave. Instinctively I reached for my kippah and handed it to him as a remembrance of this extraordinary two days. He thanked me profusely and volunteered that it would be kept forever in a place of honor in the church.

Can one sum up such a transcendent experience? Hardly. I am sure the impact will surface in many ways over time. I wrote the bulk of this on a plane returning from Frankfurt and due to its proximity the total effect of the trip is perhaps too immediate for profound reflection. I know only this: In the past 48 hours we have seen several generations of Germans most of whom were born after the Holocaust or were infants when it ended who have suffered from its aftermath. We have seen them seeking to recreate and learn about the Jewish community which once lived in their midst as a thriving vibrant part of their communal life. We have seen their almost religious reverence for the torah and the culture of the Jewish people and their intense reaching out for reconciliation with a people who they themselves never knew and may never know. We have seen a miraculous undersized torah scroll bring together people in a tiny German town in an outburst of affection the likes of which we have never witnessed in our lifetime and may never witness again. We have seen the triumph of that little scroll shine with an unparalleled brilliance through the vast chasm of seemingly impenetrable darkness that was the Holocaust. We have lived a 48 hour sacred moment in time.