

SHABBAT SERMON  
Parashat Mishpatim  
Polish Defamation Bill  
5778

January 27 is a day chosen by the United Nations to be International Holocaust Memorial Day. It is the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Russians in 1945. And it was on this day, two weeks ago, that the Polish Parliament chose to pass a bill that made it a crime to suggest any complicity by the Polish state or the Polish people in the Holocaust, during which 3 million Polish Jews were murdered. The Polish president, Andrzej Duda, signed the bill into law last week.

The Polish ambassador to the United States wrote this in a letter to the editor of the NYT: “Every country could have done more during World War II to save Jews. But only one country bears responsibility for the state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews and millions more non-Jews: Nazi Germany. It is reprehensible to say otherwise – to blame any other country or people for the Holocaust.”

And we must be fair to the Poles.

- Six million Poles were murdered during WW II; 3 million Jews and 3 million non-Jews.

- It is historically wrong to use the term, “Polish Death Camps.”

They were Nazi Death Camps on territory the Nazis captured from the Poles.

- There are 6,700 Poles recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Gentiles. They saved between 30,000 and 35,000 Jews.

But while many Poles risked their lives to protect and save Jews, many others participated in pogroms, extorted money, betrayed to the Nazis, or actively killed Jews.

- In 1941, Poles killed 340 Jews in the town of Jedwabne.
- In 1946, **when the war was over**, Poles killed 42 Jews in the city of Kielce.

My personal opinion – formed out of both reading and personal bias – is that anti-Semitism runs very deep in Poland.

- My son, Ben, once worked for a P.R. firm, a job that brought him on a business trip to Lodz. Now there are little or no Jews left in Lodz, but there are two soccer teams. When the fans of one team wants to deface the billboard of the other, they spray paint a Jewish star on it and write the word, “Jew.”

**Anti-Semitism is scape-goating Jews. It is blaming Jews to channel**

**frustration and attention away from another issue.** In this case, Po-

land’s nationalist, populist government that came to power in 2015, is resentful of the E. U. of which Germany is the strongest member.

**What’s really going on here is that the Poles are saying, “We were vic-**

**tims too. The Jews shouldn’t get all the sympathy.”**

But many Poles were guilty. They looked the other way, or gladly handed over their Jews, or actively participated in the murder. And this

new Polish law makes it illegal to speak the truth. It seeks to hide this inconvenient truth. Sigmund Freud wrote, “Life, as we find it, is too hard for us. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures.” **Life must be hard for the Poles, so they lessen their pain by erasing their complicity in the murder of Jews.**

But they cannot. In 1996, the late Israeli writer, Aharon Appelfeld, went back to his hometown of Drajinetz in Bukovina, territory that went back and forth between Romania and the Ukraine. He published the story, “Buried Homeland,” in The New Yorker in 1998. Appelfeld was 8 ½ when the Nazis invaded. His mother and grandmother were murdered in a mass execution; Appelfeld and his father escaped. I’ll read to you a long passage from that article.

- Another old man came toward us. He remembered the Jews – he even mentioned two names – but he had never heard about the slaughter. The villagers surrounded us. I remembered those fac-

es: a mixture of cunning, suspicion and false innocence. The answers they gave were convoluted, and it was hard to know what was true and what was made up.

- “Where is the mass grave?” I asked with the help of an interpreter. No one knew. ... Raising my voice, I said, “I lived here until the age of eight and a half, and I know that Jews were slaughtered here.” No response. I felt the villagers’ stares on my body. ...
- Suddenly, one of them turned to me and asked, “What do you remember from then?” Not very much, I wanted to say, but I restrained myself. My delay in replying brought a smile to the man’s lips, and he said, ‘See, you’ve also forgotten.’ ...
- More peasants gathered. They inspected me, and I inspected them. “Who remembers the Appelfeld family?” I asked. When they understood my question, a tremor passed among them. One of the old men approached me and said, “It’s hard to remember family names. We remember given names.” I said nothing. For

some reason, it was hard for me to mention the names of my father and mother.

- Then a tall man, dressed in city clothes, appeared. ... The man looked at me alertly and exclaimed, “You’re Erwin Appelfeld!” He went on to say, “Your mother’s name was Bunya, and your father was Michael. I studied in school with you. Do you remember me?”
- I couldn’t breathe. ... “The Jews were slaughtered here,” I declared again. Again, there was no response.
- A tall peasant came up, and, as if in an old ceremony, the village people explained to him what I wanted to know. He raised his arm and pointed: it was over there, on a hill. There was silence, then an outpouring of speech, which I could not understand.
- It turned out that what the people of the village had tried to conceal from me was well known, even to the children. I asked several little children, who were standing near a fence and looking at

us, where the Jews' graves were. Right away, they raised their hands and pointed.

**These people are ashamed. They or their parents were guilty. And it is easier to lie, to hide, to try to forget, than it is to honestly face their crimes and their guilt.**

In the movie, Clear and Present Danger, Harrison Ford plays the Deputy Director of the CIA. The President has order a covert military action against a South American drug cartel to cover up the crimes of a major donor. The military action goes awry. Some soldiers are killed; some are captured. A few escape into the jungle. Harrison Ford goes to South America and finds a soldier hiding out. "Who did this? Who did this to us? The soldier asked." "I did," Harrison Ford replied. "I am responsible," he said, even though he had nothing to do with the mission.

“I did. I am responsible.” These are the words one must say to move forward into life. In my opinion, these are the words Germany has said. That’s why we Jews can go back there. These are the words that every one of us must say on Yom Kippur. “I did this. I am responsible.” It’s only with those words that one can begin a new, better year. And these are the words the Poles and other Eastern Europeans must say. “We did this. We are responsible.”

Until they say those words, those countries will not be safe places for Jews and other minorities like us.