

A March 28, 1933 editorial in the Seattle Times —our hometown newspaper — unequivocally stated, and I quote, “There is no organized mistreatment of Jews in Germany....The apprehensions and fears so feverishly propagated in this and other countries are officially reported groundless.”<sup>1</sup> Reports of anti-semitism and violent treatment of minorities in the same editorial were blamed on the media and the fact that “every channel of Communistic propaganda is being employed to discredit the German government and embarrass its plans.” It even went a bit further to say that “the good Jewish citizens...should not permit their fears and their affections to be played upon...” You are overstating the case, this Seattle Times editorial claimed in 1933, it is no where near as bad as it seems.

We know that it was worse. It was unimaginably, unspeakably worse.

How did Hitler do it? How did Hitler rise to a position of power in a modern, democratic nation state? British historian A.J.P. Taylor suggests that Adolf Hitler had “the gift of translating commonplace thoughts into action...everything which Hitler did...logically unfolded from the racial doctrines in which most Germans vaguely believed.”<sup>2</sup> Milton Mayer, a journalist who taught at the University of Chicago, pointed out that for the average German, there was “no time to think...The dictatorship, and the whole process of its coming into being, was above all diverting. It provided an excuse not to think for people who did not want to think anyway.”<sup>3</sup>

For too many of its citizens, Germany in the aftermath of WWI brought a period of unemployment and economic disadvantage. The political polarization between the right and the left grew so great it “...created a yearning for strong leadership and stability.”<sup>4</sup> Political dissidents were jailed so that by the time many were aware of the danger, they were isolated and alone.

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist, Martin Niemoller said.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.*

---

<sup>1</sup> A graphic reproduction of this editorial can be found along the right side of this website: [http://depts.washington.edu/depress/nazi\\_seattle\\_times.shtml#\\_ednref21](http://depts.washington.edu/depress/nazi_seattle_times.shtml#_ednref21)

<sup>2</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, Page 155.

<sup>3</sup> The Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-45, Page 167.

<sup>4</sup> How Was It Humanly Possible: A Study Of Perpetrators And Bystanders During The Holocaust, Page 16.

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*<sup>5</sup>

What happened next is seared into the Jewish conscience. More than six million mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters perished in those fires. You are overstating the case, the Seattle Times editorial claimed, it is no where near as bad as it seems. “The good Jewish citizens...should not permit their fears and their affections to be played upon...”

It was worse. It was unimaginably, unspeakably worse.

We sit here tonight 71 years, 8 months, and 14 days after the liberation of Auschwitz.<sup>6</sup> For the few who survived, and God willing for many of us here tonight, 71 years, 8 months, and 14 days is less than the span of one lifetime. It is less than the average American lifespan. And in that span, in a single human lifetime...*(long pause)*... Germany has transformed from the killing grounds of the Jewish people to the safest place to be Jewish on the European Continent.

*If you thought I was going somewhere else with this sermon, I hope that scares you as much as it scares me.*<sup>7</sup>

In the span of a single lifetime, Germany has transformed from the killing grounds of the Jewish people to one the safest places to be Jewish in the world.

The proof is in the passports. An August 15, 2016 article in the New York Times told the story of Philip Levine, a 35 year old Brit doing the unthinkable. “Looking for a way to ensure that he could still work and live in Europe once Britain leaves the (European Union), Mr. Levine... decided to do what some Jews, including his relatives, might consider unthinkable: apply for German citizenship.”<sup>8</sup> Using the 1949 Article 116 of German Basic Law, Mr. Levine joined more than 400 Britons since Brexit in applying to reinstate the citizenship stripped from his family by the Nazis. They are not alone. More than 100,000 Israeli’s have German passports, and in 2010, 815 Americans — and more than 1,400 Israelis — applied for a reinstatement of their German citizenship.<sup>9</sup> I want to be careful not to overstate the case: many will apply for this passport as an access card to the European Union with no intention of a return to Germany. That

---

<sup>5</sup> From the teachings of Martin Niemoller, accessed from <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>

<sup>6</sup> January 27, 1945, a day now commemorated as International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

<sup>7</sup> A reference to the 2016 presidential election.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/16/world/europe/once-unthinkable-more-british-jews-seek-german-citizenship.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/16/world/europe/once-unthinkable-more-british-jews-seek-german-citizenship.html?_r=0)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/regaining-citizenship-jewish-american-families-reclaim-german-roots-a-793296.html>

access card is useful economically, to be sure, but also useful in escaping bodily harm. With anti-semitism on the rise throughout Europe and anti-semitic dog whistles even sounding in 2016 America, Germany is now one of the safest places in the world to be Jewish. In just 71 years, “inconceivable as it may seem, being both Jewish and German has become a potential form of protection rather than a fatal liability.”<sup>10</sup>

I am certain that I am not the only one in this room who had instilled in them from birth that Jews should never buy a German car or voluntarily set foot on German soil. “To forgive the Germans was unthinkable (to many Jews). To support them economically was treason.”<sup>11</sup> Yet Germany has undergone such a radical, complete transformation... in just one lifetime...that we all need to look more closely. Our own ability to atone this Yom Kippur depends upon on it.

So how did Germany atone for its transgressions against humanity? Maimonides, one of the preeminent Jewish scholars of the middle ages, writes that true repentance is a multi-step process. First, one must recognize the error of their ways. Second, they must own their wrong-doing through full declaration of their transgressions. Third, and perhaps most important, is that when confronted with an opportunity to repeat their wrong-doing they must refrain.

*It was a cold wet day in Warsaw on December 7, 1970, (West German Chancellor) Willy Brandt laid a wreath at the memorial of the Jewish ghetto. The lasting image of that day was a photo taken when Brandt fell to his knees in front of the memorial and remained completely still for half a minute on the wet stone floor....Here was a man who had resisted Hitler and owned no direct responsibility for Nazi atrocities, but took on the full weight of their actions. Brandt...was the first German head of government to adopt a clear stance that "no German is free of history."*<sup>12</sup> With this symbolic act reinforced by his political actions, Germany recognized the error of its ways.

Germany recognized the error of its ways and owned the wrong-doing through declaration of its transgressions. In a 2008 speech delivered **at the Knesset**, the Israeli parliament, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the words so many were waiting to hear: “The mass murder of 6 million Jews, carried out in the name of Germany, has brought indescribable suffering to the Jewish people, Europe and the entire world. The Shoah fills us Germans with shame. I bow my head before the victims. I bow before the survivors and before all those who helped them so they could survive.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/jurisprudence/2012/03/an\\_american\\_jew\\_becomes\\_a\\_german\\_citizen\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2012/03/an_american_jew_becomes_a_german_citizen_.html)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> <http://hub.jhu.edu/magazine/2015/summer/germany-japan-reconciliation/>

<sup>13</sup> The full text of her speech can be read here: [https://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/doc/speech\\_merkel\\_2008\\_eng.pdf](https://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/doc/speech_merkel_2008_eng.pdf)

Finally, Maimonides wrote, when confronted with an opportunity to repeat their wrongdoing one seeking true repentance must refrain. Far beyond the value of monetary reparations, Germany instituted a series of laws to protect the Jewish community and repulse elements of its past. Denying the Holocaust, trivializing the deaths of 6 millions Jews and millions of other minority groups, is illegal in Germany. Use of Nazi symbols, and even anti-semitism in general are dealt with much more swiftly in Germany than anywhere else in the world. And when confronted with ongoing violence propagated by the Assad regime in Syria and the overwhelming number of refugees — 4.7 million Syrians who have been driven from their country — Germany opened its borders. Responding to this largest migration of human beings from a war-torn area since the Holocaust, Germany welcomed more than one million displaced persons. Atonement was not easy, and it took time, but in the span of a single human life, Germany has transformed from the killing grounds of the Jewish people to a morally-driven country that is among the safest places to be Jewish in the world.

If you want to know what atonement looks like, if you want an example of how an apology is made, read the text of Angela Merkel's speech to the Knesset. Study Germany's actions from the 1950's onward. Cry when you realize Germany — the same Germany that killed six million Jews — is accepting 100 times, 100 times more Syrian refugees than America. That is how to say you are sorry.

**We** have forgotten how to say we are sorry. Instead, too many of us fall into the trap of the modern American non-apology. You know this phenomenon. When the people we have wronged demand an apology from us, but we are absolutely certain we are in the right, we issue an insincere non-apology. So prolific is the non-apology that Slate magazine sought to collect the many forms of this concept: the nonpology, the notpology, the nopology, the fauxpology, the unapology, the unpology, the pseudo-apology, the if-apology, the false apology (see also fake, hollow, conditional apology, etc.), and my favorite, the wordy but startlingly accurate description of how people express themselves after doing wrong today, the non-apology apology.<sup>14</sup>

I hope these terms are foreign and unknown to you, so let me explain.

If, in the course of your apology, the words "I'm sorry" are followed with the word "if", "but", or "you", you have just issued a nonpology. For example, "I'm sorry **if** you were offended" really means "I think my bigotry was acceptable;" or "I'm sorry **you** took it that way" really means "You are an idiot." Both are unpologies.

If your apology comes with a preamble, something like "I didn't know that it was going to hurt you, so," or "While others have done far worse," you have just issued a fauxpology.

---

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon\\_valley/2014/11/20/sorry\\_not\\_sorry\\_non\\_apology\\_fauxpology\\_unpology\\_and\\_other\\_names\\_for\\_hollow.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2014/11/20/sorry_not_sorry_non_apology_fauxpology_unpology_and_other_names_for_hollow.html)

Finally, if you attempt to issue an apology where you have taken yourself completely out of the equation, saying something like “Apologies” or “Mistakes were made”, you have just committed a non-apology apology.

“...An attitude of #sorrynotsorry undermines the practice of cheshbon ha-nefesh, of examining our actions and trying to modify our behavior,” Esther Kustanowitz wrote in the Los Angeles Jewish Journal.<sup>15</sup> “It’s an apology backtrack, a proud proclamation that the rules of society don’t apply to us — we’re right, so we shouldn’t have to apologize.... (Sorry, not sorry). It’s up to us to take the words requesting forgiveness, consider them seriously and speak our lines with intention so that “sorry” means something deep and true, something that would never be followed by “not sorry.”

“The difference between a genuine expression of remorse and a mealy-mouthed fauxpology comes down to acknowledging the offense clearly...restoring the offended parties’ dignity, assuring them they’re safe from a repeat offense, expressing shame and humility which show understanding of their suffering, and making appropriate reparation...”<sup>16</sup> Acknowledging the offense, restore dignity, assure them they’re safe from repeat offense, express shame and humility, make appropriate reparation... Maimonides would be proud. We should be worried — When is the last time you have done that?

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many will die and how many will be born? Who at a ripe old age and who before their time? Who by fire and who by water? Who by sword and who by beast? But t’shuvah, repentance, can avert the severe decree. It hurts so much to live in the face of death that we want our U’netaneh Tokef prayer to be a metaphor. It is not. It is a wake up call. It is a shofar blast of a warning. We don’t know when the gates will close forever — the gates of forgiveness in our relationships with other human beings we have wronged; the gates of public opinion when a breach of trust or judgement has occurred; the gates of life and return to God’s good graces. We don’t know when the gates will close before we have a chance to sincerely repent for our wrong-doing.

So let’s do it right the first time. We all make mistakes. Own it. Apologize — with no “ifs,” “buts,” or “yous” to follow. Vow to never do it again — and then never do it again. Germany could do it: in the span of a single lifetime, it is again one of the safest places in the world to be Jewish. A country has made complete atonement. Let this be the year that we can do it, too.

---

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.jewishjournal.com/opinion/article/apologies\\_in\\_the\\_age\\_of\\_sorrynotsorry](http://www.jewishjournal.com/opinion/article/apologies_in_the_age_of_sorrynotsorry)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon\\_valley/2014/11/20/sorry\\_not\\_sorry\\_non\\_apology\\_fauxpology\\_unpology\\_and\\_other\\_names\\_for\\_hollow.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2014/11/20/sorry_not_sorry_non_apology_fauxpology_unpology_and_other_names_for_hollow.html)