

Global Jewish
Peoplehood
Learning Series

Can we go
home again?
Should we go
home?

Rabbi Dave Siegel



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Goal

The goal of this session is to introduce the participants to the current state of Jewish life in Poland, and begin a conversation regarding the narrative that surrounds American education on the topic of the History of Polish Jewry.

Introduction and Opening Questions

10 Minutes

Begin the session by asking the group the following opening questions:

- What do you think of when you hear "Poland"?
- What factors do you think influenced your answer?

Discussion

15 Minutes

Break into groups. Read and discuss the following text.

Polin - In Hebrew this word means 'Poland' but it also means 'you will rest here'. Both those meanings are woven into a beautiful legend about Jews coming to Poland. This story is quoted, among others, by Gershom Bader in his book published in Yiddish in 1927. The legend is about Jews who were escaping persecutions in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. On a quest for a safe haven, they were going eastwards...

(...) legend has it that after they decreed a fast and beseeched God that he should save them from the hands of their murderers, there fell from the heavens a slip of paper on which was written: 'Go to Poland and there you will find rest'.

The Jews set out for Poland. When they arrived, birds in the forest greeted them. They chirped „Po lin! Po lin!” The travelers interpreted these sounds according to the Hebrew language, as if the birds wanted to tell them, 'Here you should pass the night ...' And when they caught sight of the trees, it seemed to them that a page of the Gemara was hanging from every little branch. They understood at once that here a new place had been revealed to them where they could settle and continue to develop the Jewish spirit and age-old Jewish learning (...).

- www.storiesofpolin.com

Guiding Questions

- What are your first impressions of this story?
- Why is this story compelling as a “creation myth”?
- Do you think this story holds value for members of the Polish Jewish community today?

Activity - 4 Corners

20 Minutes

Place the following statements around the room.

- The Polish people were active participants in the murdering of Jews during the Shoah. No Jews should ever go back there. I don't want my money supporting their economy.
- It is important to know what happened in Poland during the Shoah. All Jewish students should go there to see the death camps, and then travel to Israel to see life!
- The best way for us to show the world that Hitler didn't win is for Jewish life to be rebuilt in Poland.
- I believe that it is our responsibility to support Jewish communities around the world. The emerging pluralistic communities in Poland need the support of the greater Jewish community.

Have the students explain their choices. If time permits students can discuss the choices within their group and then report back.

Read the following information and ask the students if this changes their answer.

I am an eternal optimist, yet I could not have imagined in 1994 that 240 children would be enrolled in Warsaw's Jewish day school, that Limmud Poland would attract 1,000 participants annually from all around Poland, that different streams of Jewish religious practice would take root, that thriving JCCs operate in Krakow and Warsaw, that more than 650 young people have participated in Taglit-Poland's Birthright trip to Israel, that Moishe House would choose to host its international conference in Warsaw (where it has an active house), or that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which presents the thousand-year history of Polish Jews, will open this year on the site of the Warsaw ghetto.

Who would have been able to predict that every summer more than 20,000 people from Poland and around the world fill Krakow's Szeroka Square to enjoy the closing night concert of the Jewish Cultural Festival, that Jewish and Holocaust Studies departments have opened in major Polish Jewish universities, that books about Polish Jewish history and tradition abound, or that thousands of volunteers around the country - both Jews and non-Jews - serve as the dedicated caretakers of Polish Jewish history and culture?

- Lieberman, H. (2014) Finding the Pintele Yid, *Deep Roots, New Branches: Personal Essays on the Rebirth of Jewish Life in Poland Since 1989*.

Ask the participants if any of them would like to change their initial answer. If so, why?

Are there any additional opinions that you would add to this activity?

Action Item

15 minutes

Using provided paper and pencils ask the participants to write down five ways that we can support the Polish Jewish community. After the group shares this information, the sheets should be collected and a master list compiled.

Wrap up

Ask each participant to answer the following question: what are you taking away with you from this session?