

Los Angeles Rabbis Gather in Berlin

A Trip That Moves from the Past in Germany to the Present in Israel

By ADAM SACKS

Rabbi Eli Herscher announces the death toll (four killed, 15 injured) for the latest suicide bombing in Israel, over the Berlin tour bus loudspeaker. The bus has just passed the Jewish cemetery in Schönhauser Allee and Rabbi Herscher is on his cell phone with his nephew in Tel Aviv. The scene is emblematic for this trip of a group of Los Angeles rabbis to Germany: they are viewing the German-Jewish past under the cloud of the current war in Israel and anti-Semitic attacks in Europe. And their interest in what is going on in Israel is more than empathy and concern for fellow Jews. After Germany, they will continue on to Israel themselves.

For Rabbi Herscher, simply the act of showing up in Germany and Israel is an accomplishment, even if the gathering does not achieve its intended goals: building bridges between the various Los Angeles synagogues. His parents were from Cologne and Mannheim and emigrated to Israel in 1935. Since German was spoken at home, Rabbi Herscher is the

only one out of the group of rabbis who can speak the language. And he is pleased to hear it on the streets. Before coming, he was more nervous about traveling to Germany than about traveling to Israel, yet has found himself unusually comfortable in Germany as he is drawn to his roots. He recounts how he and the other rabbis all sat in the Munich Hof singing while wearing their *Kippot*. For one moment Hitler's old haunt was taken over by this group of American rabbis discovering Germany. When it comes to the new wave of anti-Semitism, Rabbi Herscher is more concerned about France than Germany. As the President of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, Rabbi Steven Reuben, declared, "the great irony of this year is that it is safer for a Jew in Germany than in Israel." This is a testimony to the power of terror, he added.

The tour's organizers, TAL Tours, which works in conjunction with the German and Israeli tourism ministries, hope this trip will become an adult "March of the Living." Other tours on offer follow themes such as *Kristallnacht*, the Genera-

tions, Anne Frank's life and Jewish music. All tours begin in Germany and end in Israel. The dramatic increase in the number of American Jews participating in these tours, reflects the change the image of Germany has undergone within the Jewish community over the last decade.

Rabbi Mark Diamond, a full time executive at the Board of Rabbis and the trip's organizer has brought together 13 rabbis representing all religious strands and geographical areas across greater Los Angeles. Present are two modern Orthodox, five Conservative, five Reform and one Reconstructionist rabbi, with congregations ranging in size from 150 to 3,000 families. All levels of observance are accommodated. The trip is intended as a balm not only for American Jewish relations with Germany, but also for the tensions between various Jewish movements within America.

Ties between Israel and Germany emphasized

The Israel portion of the trip, emphasizes Rabbi Diamond, is not tourism. It involves visiting soldiers in hospitals, bringing donations of over \$20,000 for the victims of terror, as well as gift baskets for the merchants in Ben-Yehuda Street. Everyone should plan a trip to Israel now, he says. "Every day [that we spend] in Germany and Israel is a combination of death, tragedy, sadness and remembrance [interspersed] with moments of hope and inspiration." Rabbi Diamond regards close relations between Germany and Israel as a natural consequence of history: the renaissance of Jewish life being the ultimate answer to Hitler.

The first day of the trip coincided with Yom Hashoah, which was marked by a visit to Dachau. The trip ends in Israel on Yom Ha'atzmaut. The rabbis seek to commemorate the Jewish past in Germany while also seeing today's Germany with new eyes. The group was received by the German Foreign Ministry and the Berlin mayor's office. The briefing at the Ministry convinced the rabbis that Germany is



Rabbi Mark Diamond in Berlin.

Photo: Matthias Königshulte

still Israel's best ally after the United States, something that some of them were very surprised to learn. Rabbi Lawrence Goldmark, executive director of the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis and here on his second visit, was very impressed with the German laws against anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, which have no equivalent in the United States. With talk of an arms embargo and a boycott against Israel hanging in the air, the rabbis felt they couldn't emphasize the importance of maintaining the close relations between Germany and Israel enough. The group extended Joschka Fischer's analogy of the United States as the driver in the car of the peace process, saying that Germany and the European Union were noisy back seat drivers. In response to statements that Yasir Arafat, as the democratically elected leader of Palestine, is the legitimate partner for peace, the rabbis diplomatically reminded their hosts that Adolf Hitler was also the elected leader of Nazi Germany.

Rabbis Hold Prayer Vigil in Support of Israel

Members of the Upper West Side Jewish Community Come Together to Pray for Peace