



European Union for Progressive Judaism

December 2015 Newsletter

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EUPJ President's message

On December 2nd I represented the EUPJ at an impressive event at the Jewish Museum in Berlin where Chancellor Angela Merkel was presented with the Abraham Geiger Prize by the leadership of the eponymous college.

The occasion was one of paradox and irony (all, let me hasten to say, positive).

The paradox was personal. I was representing European Progressive Judaism at an event in the city where my parents had been born and lived until they fled for their lives in the thirties. Ergo, had they not fled, it is most likely I would not "be" and certainly not in Berlin 80 years later!

The ironical part is more holistic. Angela Merkel is by any measure the standout politician of the 21st century. She was cited, and here I summarise, for courageous political leadership, impactful and humanitarian both within Germany and beyond its borders. She has been unstintingly supportive of the restoration of Jewish life in Germany, which together with support for Israel, she states as essential for the moral raison d'être of present day Germany.

Merkel has staked her personal political future on her belief that Germany must take in a million Syrian refugees in a year. Stop and think of what would happen to the leaders of the United States (equivalent number 3.5 million), the UK (700,000 – presently thinking of 20,000 over five years!) and, if the imagination goes wild, Japan, (1.2 million). Their political leaders would be deposed.

Chancellor Merkel spoke to the refugee issue in accepting her award. She understood, she said, the concerns of the German Jewish community that the refugees were people who have been brought up in an anti-Semitic country. She stated that they would have to assimilate to meet the norms of German society and that any signs of anti-Semitism would be dealt with head on. She defended her position on the taking in of such a large number of refugees.

She stated that Germany has the wherewithal to do this, should do this as a leading country in Europe, must do it and will do it successfully. "Must do" to her



Chancellor Angela Merkel

is a particular responsibility of Germany because of the crimes (she used the word) of its past. And yes, it will cause changes in Germany society, and that maybe is not a bad thing. Talk of leadership!

And here the irony for us Jews. Many of us I believe feel uncomfortable with the thought that the great politician of our generation is a German. How much cosier it would be if he or she were American, British or French. I think *dafke* the opposite. Judaism teaches us that redemption for sins comes from acts of *teshuvah*, repentance. Germany and its post-war leaders have done *teshuvah*. Many would state not enough, "nothing could ever be enough" – correct. But one can only do what one can do. And the *teshuvah* of Germany is not only the unstinting support for the re-establishment of Jewish life and the admission of Russian Jewish refugees, but now also the admission in a single year of a million of the Islamic faith escaping from a cruel dictatorship – as did Jews and others who fled from Germany 80 years ago. Merkel has potentially risked her political future for the certitude of doing what she believes is morally correct.

Angela Merkel is a great political leader. And I felt happy that she was being honoured by Jews, and in particular, by an institution of European Progressive Judaism.

Leslie Bergman



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