

Optimism comes with March of the Living

By Kelsey Taylor Luria

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I have been asked what Judaism means to me throughout my life. Before traveling on the March of the Living educational program, I did not know how to answer other than saying Judaism gave me spiritual guidance. After returning from our trip to Poland and Israel, I can say that Judaism is not only cultural and spiritual, but a part of my identity.

To me, Judaism is being the best person you can be, learning from your mistakes and getting up when you fall. It is helping people who are less fortunate than you and making your community a better place. I believe there is good in every person. Judaism is finding this spark of holiness.

Throughout classes to “prepare” for this journey, I questioned how anyone could possibly prepare to stand in a gas chamber where millions of innocent lives were taken. I questioned why I was putting myself through the pain of seeing how and where my ancestors died.

Arriving at Auschwitz, 33 rowdy teenagers went from laughing and messing around to complete silence as we walked through the gates. With every step I took, my heart sank a little more. We walked into cold brick buildings to see piles of hair and millions of shoes trapped behind glass walls. I felt anger and disgust. I asked myself, how could anyone do this to innocent, hardworking people?

I was upset at myself for not feeling any sense of sadness. As we walked through the camp, I felt dirty and outraged. I didn’t want to take another step but I knew that, painful as it was, I had to push through.

When we walked through the door of Jewish Hall I could finally breathe. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw Hebrew letters mounted on the wall; I saw light, hope, and most importantly, faith. At that moment I realized the only thing that could keep anyone alive was believing in God and having faith that things will get better.

I felt strength. Hearing prayers and Hebrew words gave me the strength to move forward.

We walked into a room with nothing but plain white walls. Finally, music began to play and pictures slowly appeared on the walls. In family videos you could see children laughing, smiling, playing. I reached out my arm and just as I approached the wall the video vanished. My heart sank as I tried to grasp every picture, every video. Tears began flooding out of my eyes. I couldn’t be sad because of what happened in the Shoah; but I could be sad because of everything that we as people lost.

As we walked into the gas chambers the air got colder and I felt sick to my stomach. You could see scratches on the walls, you could almost hear the screams of children, feel the fear in the air. We lit a candle and stood in silence. I held my breath until I got outside. I refused to breathe in death and evil. We stood outside the chamber in a circle, I couldn’t process what I had just gone through. I still can’t imagine the fear they felt knowing that they were about to take their last breaths.

During our time in Poland we also visited Maidanik. Personally, I felt this was the hardest camp to visit. The barracks smelled like rotting and burning flesh. I almost threw up when I looked slightly over my shoulder to see children playing in the fields just beyond the barbed wire.

As we continued through the camp, I felt a new sense of fear — fear that another Shoah could arise at any moment. Maidanik was exactly as it was during the Holocaust, nothing moved, nothing changed. When we finally reached the end of the camp, I turned around to see what appeared to be a mound of ashes. We sang and we prayed; we lit candles and placed stones. But no matter what we did, or what we said, these innocent people would be here in this one place forever.

“Do not cover our blood.” As a Jewish people, we have committed



COURTESY OF THE LURIA FAMILY

Kelsey Luria was one of 12 Tucson teens who traveled to Poland and Israel.

to remember what has happened, we have promised to never forget. But not only have we promised this, but we have made it our duty to tell others the story of the Shoah.

Later, when I stepped outside the airport in Israel and could feel the hot sun on my bare shoulders, I was finally able to take a deep breath. I felt at home; I felt safe. When I closed my eyes all I could hear was Hebrew, our language being spoken in our land. We were not defeated during the Shoah, but we were able to learn and grow. We overcame the evil of the Holocaust.

Early the next morning we were off to climb the rock fortress of Masada. Determined to make it up by sunrise, we began running up the hill. At one point I wasn’t sure if my knee would hold up and I heard voices in the back of my mind telling me to turn around. Even though it might hurt like hell, I knew I was physically and mentally capable of this climb. I said to myself, “I can do this, and I will do this, not only for myself, but for everyone who cannot do this.” I felt as if I were on the top of the world when we reached the top.

A few days later we were standing in the streets of Ben Yehuda late at night. I could hear music blasting from the clubs and cars speeding down the streets; this was everyday life in Israel. Sudden-

ly a siren began to blare throughout the entire state of Israel. The chaos stopped. The second the siren began to ring Israel fell silent. Cars stopped, voices died down.

This siren rang in honor of the fallen soldiers, in honor of everyone who risked and gave their lives for the state of Israel. Memorial Day in Israel was practiced so differently than in the United States. We mourned, sang Kaddish and we were all united. I remember standing in the street when the siren began; all I could do was hold my boyfriend’s hand and pray. For 60 seconds, the entire world just stopped. It was unbelievable to be a part of something so big.

We went from crying and mourning the loss of our people to celebrating the liberation of the state of Israel overnight. The party began and everyone was able to forget about not only the pain still engraved in us from Poland, but also the pain of Memorial Day.

Hundreds of teens from all over the world waving Israeli flags in the air and singing along to the songs we all grew up to. We then joined other delegations as we marched to the Kotel (the Western Wall) to the beat of the drums in the background. I couldn’t help but smile and laugh and just embrace the moment. It was while we were looking over the walls at the city

MARCH OF THE LIVING

Twelve Tucson teens participated in March of the Living, which brings students from all over the world to Poland to study the history of the Holocaust.

Next month the annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day will commemorate the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp on Jan. 27, 1945.

LEARN MORE

Through Feb. 1, the Jewish History Museum, 564 S. Stone Ave., is featuring “Hélène Berr, A Stolen Life,” a traveling exhibition designed, created and circulated by Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris, France.

Next door is the Holocaust History Center. Visit both Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m., and Fridays from noon to 3 p.m.

jewishhistorymuseum.org

of Jerusalem that I knew I had to move there one day. I thought to myself, “This is where I am supposed to be. Right here, right now!”

Sitting at the airport we closed our eyes and said, “We will never forget.” Nowadays, when anyone mentions the word “Israel” you think of big guns, car bombs and war. When I think of “Israel,” I think of home, faith and holiness.

I don’t see a country full of violence and anger, but rather a country full of hope and pride.

Poland taught me that no matter how bad of a situation, there is always a lesson to be learned from it. We were able to see that no one knew how strong they were until being strong was the only choice they had.

Kelsey Luria, 17, a senior at Catalina Foothills High School, is currently hospitalized at Diamond Children’s fighting a rare and aggressive form of leukemia called AML. To learn more about Kelsey and her fight against cancer, visit BpositiveTeamKelsey.com