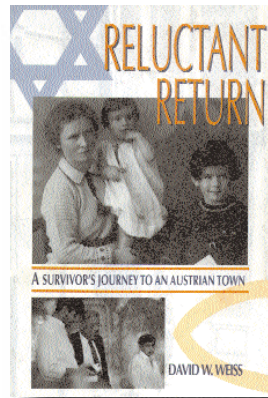


Reluctant Return: A Survivor's Journey to an Austrian Town

By David W. Weiss



Indiana University Press
Bloomington, 1999
189 pages

Reviewed by Alan Rosen

David Weiss, professor emeritus of immunology at Hadassah Medical School at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, fled Wiener Neustadt, the Austrian town in which he was born, shortly after the Nazi *Anschluss* in 1938. At the time, he was eleven years old. He grew up in the United States and pursued a successful academic career, during which time he drifted away from religious Jewish life. When he was middle-aged, a trip to Israel propelled him back into religion and kindled a love affair with Israel that culminated in his making *aliyah*. Once in Israel, he flourished in his chosen

Professor Rosen lives in Jerusalem where he writes and teaches about Holocaust literature. His book, Sounds of Defiance: The Holocaust, Multilingualism, and the Problem of English, is due to appear next spring.

career, nurtured a family and cultivated a passionate religious life.

Weiss' memoir tells this story and more. In sixteen carefully wrought chapters, he describes how, in 1993, he and a group of fellow refugees were invited by Helmut and Uli Eiwens, leaders of a heterodox Christian church in Wiener Neustadt, to return to the town as honored guests. The Eiwens believed that the spiritual integrity of their community (and, indeed, of all Christians) depended on atoning for the destruction of Europe's Jews. An essential dimension of this atonement was to welcome back to Wiener Neustadt the Jews who had been expelled or had fled. The invitation of return tendered to Weiss and his landsmen was thus based on the Eiwens' profound faith and wish to make amends.

Weiss' memoir recounts the refugees' "reluctance"—the intense deliberation and debate on whether they should accept the Eiwens' offer—and chronicles the "return," the May 1995 trip to, and the Shabbat observed in, Wiener Neustadt. The title of his book, *Reluctant Return*, thus summarizes this dual dynamic that shapes Weiss' story. But on another level, it also refers to the rhythms of Weiss' Jewish life: reluctance to observe the traditional lifestyle of his European forebears, a reluctance which eventually gives way to a return to such a lifestyle.

The memoir's drama arises from the determined resistance to returning to post-Holocaust Austria. Initially, Weiss tells us why he doesn't wish to honor the invitation:

I have wanted nothing to do with things Austrian since we made our escape. The memories are bitter. Memories

of a damaged youth.

As a later chapter detailing the history of Austrian anti-Semitism shows, the author believes there is no reason to return to a country that so fully supported the Final Solution. To be sure, we learn that he has paid several short visits to Austria: as a young man to visit relatives and as a scientist to take part in conferences. But these excursions only confirmed Weiss' conviction that Austria was an unrepentant land:

...the town [of Wiener Neustadt], beautifully rebuilt in its medieval form, would forever be no more than the scorched earth its brown-shirted Burgers had made of it for me.

Memories of these experiences only reinforce his conviction that he should not go back. As he laconically concludes the chapter: "No return." But the story Weiss tells is one of resistance gradually but surely worn away. The certainty expressed in the early chapters gives way to a tentativeness. By the end of chapter six, Weiss takes on a different tone:

And now the Eiwens, and I am very much afraid to return [Do I really wish to go?] back to the place that had despised me, that I had despised?

Weiss' questioning shows that his determination is flagging. The former Wiener Neustadt Jews do not, however, give in easily. Indeed, it is only upon meeting the Eiwens in Jerusalem that Weiss and his landsmen are won over. Weiss' account of the crucial Jerusalem meeting brings together a number of themes that shape his narrative: the power of the face-to-face encounter; the capacity of empathy to transform a relationship; the disarming force of sincerity in a broken world.

Overcome by unexpected compassion for the Eiwens, the refugees agree to go back. When the author recounts the

return to Wiener Neustadt, he emphasizes the drama of the trip by giving a day-by-day description, as if matching the Torah's patience in describing the day-by-day sequence of Creation. And, as with the Torah, the climax comes on Shabbat, where, as observed in Wiener Neustadt, the combination of prayer, words and *kavanah*—with ecstatic singing and dancing lasting late into the night—testifies to an on-going Jewish presence.

What precisely we sing and dance this night matters little. We have lost ourselves in rhythm, in a continuum, shed our reserve, shed our guard, not needed, for we are a strong people, the sturdiness of thirty-five hundred years of defying the probabilities.

Return thus signals a demonstration—a protest, a performance. The word is fitting, especially since earlier on in the memoir, Weiss tells of his social activism at Berkeley, California, and of his regular participation in demonstrations. In Wiener Neustadt, on Shabbat, the activism finds religious and historical expression. Austria had sought to eliminate its Jews and by doing so, to eliminate Jewishness. The return of Wiener Neustadt's aging Jews was meant to show otherwise. To be sure, the demonstration of continuing Jewish existence is a rather common response to the Holocaust among religious and non-religious communities alike. (The March of the Living, the annual pilgrimage to Poland and Israel made by Jewish youth, is only one among many examples of programs that honor the dead while celebrating the vibrancy of Jewish life in the present.) Weiss' story gives life to this routine message of affirmation by detailing the unforeseen personal changes he experiences. In Wiener Neustadt, his skepticism breaks down, and his reserve is disarmed. This process, in turn, leads to a rare moment of spiritual intensity. Underneath Weiss' intellectual and moral sophistication, there surfaces a spiritual innocence, which, by its refusal to be destroyed, shows the persistence of the European Jewish legacy in the wake of the Holocaust. The memoir's closing words distill its conclusions:

What has expanded is a commitment to the salience of the individual. For me that can no longer be a platitude, drawn upon occasion from a repertoire of condescending rhetoric. The return was a confrontation, flesh and blood, with the singularity of which men and women—ordinary men and women—are capable. It was for me a palpable confirmation of belief in a human future, in the potential of the self even in wastelands.

"Platitude," "rhetoric": Weiss is a scientist absorbed by the possibilities or the limits of language. In this case, the return to his hometown overcomes the potential of language to be reduced to hollow phrases. Appositely, he, at one point, reflects on his own struggle with language:

It has been said that language is the most incontestable laissez-passer to belonging. I did not have that pass. . . . To me [accented English] has always been a reminder of a detested place from which I was ejected and to which return was neither possible nor wanted. . . . I still bristle when an opaque listener strains to understand my painstakingly articulated words.

I wonder to what degree such sentiments shape the English in which Weiss crafts his story of return. My ear hears the fusion of scientist, *talmid chacham* and memoirist together with the doubly transplanted accents of voice. To my mind, however, his struggle with the English language does not diminish but enhances the narrative. The often elevated discourse that Weiss uses to tell his tale displays his wish to get things exactly right (is this the scientist or the Talmudist?). Exhibiting a vocabulary that has the reader marveling, such discourse also suggests the non-native speaker's desire to demonstrate that he lacks nothing. I have quoted extensively to show how much language matters to Weiss, which is, in its own way, a part of the story. I wonder also how this English narrative intimates that the return should not be misunderstood; a different kind of return would have had him write the memoir in German.

Understandably alienated from his

Germanic roots, Weiss shows himself beautifully at home in Jewish ones. This enables him, for instance, to center the return on Shabbat observance and the ecstasy that it fosters. Yet, the ecstasy of Shabbat also presents something of a puzzle. Swept away by the singing and dancing on Friday night, Weiss' entry for the next day shows no trace of Shabbat observance or atmosphere. Did nothing spill over from the night before? How could it not? If it did, why does Weiss describe the day untouched by a Shabbat atmosphere? Perhaps this split between night and day also suggests the incomplete return, the way that Jewish life, even when most forceful and poignant, cannot take hold in the Austria that Weiss describes.

A moving chronicle of one survivor's journey, Weiss' memoir must also be viewed in its broader contexts. The first is that of the postwar Christian-Jewish encounter. Weiss and his landsmen receive the invitation to return from devout Christians who believe that they must atone for the destruction of European Jewry and, specifically, for the annihilation of Jewish life in their Austrian town. This invitation has as its backdrop the phenomenon of Christian denominations acknowledging the role Christian anti-Semitism played in the Holocaust. This kind of acknowledgment has led to declarations on the part of Church councils, the revision of Christian liturgy and the elimination in schools of what Edward Flannery, one of Christianity's leading clerics, poignantly referred to as "the teaching of contempt." It has, moreover, encouraged many to begin dialogues with Jews in the hope of learning more about what Jews really do and believe rather than settling for vague and poisonous stereotypes. Not every Christian or Christian institution has instituted or celebrated these changes. But Weiss' own story must be viewed in the context of a culture of atonement that has moved a number of Christian denominations to take steps to make amends.

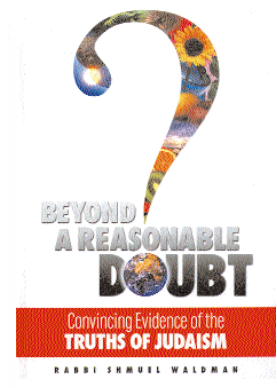
This survivor's return must also be viewed in its historical context. In

recent decades, individuals, groups and communities of survivors have returned to their hometowns. In some cases, the return was self-motivated, a response to a personal drive to see what was left after unprecedented devastation. Weiss tells us that he, too, was motivated by such a wish at an earlier stage of life. But the focus of his chronicle is, of course, different, describing a journey undertaken at the behest of the town's current residents. Other survivors have acted similarly. Such invitations have rarely been acted upon without weighing what a return to a devastated home will mean—to the returnee as well as to those who have invited him. Does return imply exculpation? Does it profane the sacrifices underwent by the victims who are no more? Does it convey a measure of legitimacy to the non-Jews who were complicit, to some degree, in the persecution of their Jewish neighbors yet conduct their day-to-day affairs as if untouched by the latter's absence? (As the memoir relates, clearly the Eiwens and their congregants anguish over this absence; most Austrians, however, go about life unruffled by it). Weiss' chronicle surely has its own special drama, told with patience and searing honesty. But the act of return has its antecedents, without which it is likely that the invitation to the former Jewish residents of Wiener Neustadt would never have been forthcoming.

These contexts are thus necessary to take into account. But they do not substitute for Weiss' compelling narrative; it is clear that we would be so much the poorer had Weiss never written this memoir. For it painstakingly brings together many facets of an exemplary life: success overcoming displacement; Jewish tradition countering its dissolution; generosity being offered to non-Jews instead of (or in spite of) hatred; an exacting commitment to the word, eschewing cliché. Ultimately, the story of Weiss' multiple returns—to Austria, to faith, to Israel—documents the quest of an uprooted life to find a way home. **JA**

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

By Rabbi Shmuel Waldman



Feldheim Publishers
Jerusalem, 2004
313 pages

Reviewed by Jack Abramowitz

“When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” These words, placed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the mouth of his most famous creation, Sherlock Holmes, sum up the essence of Rabbi Shmuel Waldman's book, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*. Sometimes in life we have to make some serious choices. Do we believe in the big bang or in Bereishit? In evolution or in *Elokeinu*? In Yeshu or in *Yiddishkeit*? If these options were objectively evaluated, the apparent “truths” of our society might be eliminated, leaving the *emet* of Torah.

But if the existence of a Creator and the truth of Torah are so easily proven beyond a reasonable doubt, or even by a preponderance of evidence, why isn't everybody an observant Jew? To answer this, let us quote—this time, the father of modern horror—Howard Phillips Lovecraft: “The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.” In other words, people can turn a blind eye to truths that would seriously inconvenience them. And let's face it, acknowledging that there's a God, that He created the world, and that He gave the Torah, requires some significant lifestyle mod-

ification.

Serious consideration of God and Torah (with the possibility of the attendant lifestyle modification) is hopefully what will occur upon reading this book. Rabbi Waldman has compiled information on a broad spectrum of topics, all focused on a single goal: proving the truths of Judaism. What readers will do once they read this information is up to them. (See chapter 7; it's all about free will.)

The first two chapters, “Compelling Evidence of a Creator” and “The Divine Origin of the Torah,” tread areas previously visited by Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen in *Permission to Believe* (Jerusalem, 1990) and *Permission to Receive* (Jerusalem, 1994), respectively. While this inevitably invites comparison, Rabbi Kelemen's books are fundamentally different than the one currently under review. Each author employs a distinct approach and a singular writing style. Each one also includes unique information, so that the works complement one another, rather than compete.

Rabbi Waldman's style is casual and chatty, which makes the subject matter approachable. But he occasionally takes it a little too far, undermining the seriousness of the scholarship. For example, while speaking of navigation vis-a-vis bird migration, Waldman makes “cutesy” comments such as: “... to me there's the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, and there's a plate and there's a spoon ...” and “I'm not even sure what polarized light is....” These self-deprecating remarks are intended to be light-hearted, but they fail. Given the amount of research Waldman has done for the book, he clearly *does* know what polarized light is, as well as what the Big and Little Dippers are. Mercifully, such cuteness is confined to this topic.

Some of the subsequent chapters, such as “The Seven Wonders of Jewish History,” directly address the “reasonable doubt” of the title. Others, such as “Understanding God's

Foreknowledge and Our Free Will” and “Some More Understanding of the Holocaust and Human Suffering,” tackle pressing questions of Jewish philosophy, rather than the rightness of God and Torah.

The preceding paragraph may have just sent owners of *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* searching through their volumes, confused at their inability to find the latter two chapters. This is because there are two editions of *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*. The original, 267-page hardcover edition (published in 2002) is aimed at those already possessing a Jewish education. The newer edition, a slightly smaller-size paperback of 313 pages, is clearly labeled, “Special General Readership Edition.” “General Readership” means no previous Jewish education is required.

The differences between the two editions are not huge. Much of them are semantic in nature. For example, chapter two's “Shimon” is “Dave” in the general readership edition, “the

Mashiach” is “the Messiah,” “*Devarim*” is “Deuteronomy,” et cetera. The author expresses some trepidation in the introduction to the revised edition. He fears that some of his comments may be “a little premature” for new readers since they must read the book “before being able to make any serious decisions regarding [their] spiritual li[ves].” For the most part, his fears are unfounded. Perhaps the only place where he jumps the gun is in the chapter “The World to Come—Eternal Existence” where he takes it for granted that the reader agrees that sending one's children to yeshiva is a necessary lifestyle choice. This may be a reasonable assumption in the version intended for moderately knowledgeable, observant Jews who may have questions. In a volume for newcomers, it may be too much, too soon. Beyond that single presumption, nothing in the text asks more from the reader than an open mind.

As of this writing, the general readership edition is (ironically) not yet available to the public. It is currently only available to Jewish outreach organizations for their constituents. (I recently ordered over 800 copies for the Orthodox Union's National Conference of Synagogue Youth [NCSY].) I am told that the book will be more accessible soon. Already observant Jews should not balk at picking up the general readership edition. While the language is anglicized, the ideas are not watered down, and the supplemental material will benefit readers from all educational backgrounds.

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt is a welcome addition to the Jewish outreach library. Despite a few picked nits, it is an overwhelmingly useful book to have. With its broad array of topics and approachable style, it provides a perfect entry-point for many beginners. Either edition is capable of providing new information, an important refresher course and necessary *chizuk* to the already initiated. **JA**