



## Poland

Day 1: **Travel and our first impressions of Warsaw**  
Thursday Apr 24, 2014

Day 2: **Warsaw Cemetery and Treblinka**  
Friday Apr 25, 2014

Day 3: **Shabbat in Warsaw3 Warsaw**  
Saturday Apr 26, 2014

Day 4: **Auschwitz-Birkenau**  
Sunday Apr 27, 2014

Day 5: **Worldwide March of the Living Oswiecim**  
Monday, Apr 28, 2014

Day 6: **Tarnow Southern Poland**  
Tuesday, April 29, 2014

Day 7: **Lublin, Eastern Poland**  
Wednesday, April 30, 2014



## Israel

Day 8: **Caesaria**  
Thursday, May 1, 2014

Day 9: **Ein Gedi & Dead Sea**  
Friday, May 2, 2014

Day 10: **Jerusalem**  
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Day 11: **Erv Yom HaZikaron, Herzliyah**  
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Day 12: **Yom HaZikaron & Erv Yom Hat**  
Monday, May 5, 2014

Day 13: **Yom HaAtzmaut & The March in Jerusalem**  
Tuesday, May 6, 2014

**In preparation for the trip:**



Standing under a giant tallit, our entire delegation of 228 teens, survivors, and staff receive a blessing for our journey.

## Day 1: Travel and our first impressions of Warsaw



In the beginning – 4/23/2014 At the airport in Chicago, waiting for the next flight – to Poland.

### The Journey Begins



The Los Angeles delegation of the BJE March of the Living started today with a VERY early arrival at LAX. After a bit of a *balagon* (craziness) at the airport as 220+ people tried to check into 3 separate flights, it was off to either Chicago (the majority of the group) or NY (the smaller group).

After uneventful flights, the NY group landed first and had a short, 1 hour tour of the old Jewish ghetto area of Warsaw. Our historian, Mark Lazar, showed us some of the original apartments that were in the Warsaw ghetto. Then we went for some down time while the rest of the group was picking up their luggage to grab a coffee and danish before meeting up with the rest of the group to get our

journey underway. Once we met up with the rest of the group, we had lunch outside the Ministry of Culture and Science. We then went on a short walking tour of Warsaw which was both informative and served the purpose of keeping this sleepy group awake.

It was then off to the Old City square for some free time and much needed coffee and snacks. We just arrived at our hotel for some much needed showers, dinner and SLEEP.

The plan is to update this blog as often as possible but we are dealing with slow and intermittent internet access. We will also ask our participants to contribute their thoughts as often as possible. Here is the first of those entries...

Today has been a long day. Just after we landed we kicked things off strong visiting the Warsaw Ghetto wall and the old city. Looking forward to tomorrow!

An original apartment building in the ghetto



Today has felt like one huge day.

We have also tried to include some historical data regarding the places we are visiting each day...

Warsaw – Warsaw, the largest city in Poland, became the capital of Poland in 1596. There are records of Jews living in Warsaw from as early as the 15th century – in 1792 Jews comprised one tenth of the city's residents. In the 19th century, despite many restrictions imposed on the Jewish community, the Jewish population in Warsaw grew considerably, becoming the largest Jewish community in Europe, and the second largest in the world (after New York). Before WWII approximately 378,000 Jews lived in Warsaw, comprising about 29% of the total population of the city.

Warsaw Ghetto – Established in November 1940, the ghetto, surrounded by a wall, confined nearly 500,000 Jews awaiting shipment to the death camps in eastern Poland. Approximately 45,000 Jews died in the ghetto due to overcrowding, forced labor, filthy living conditions, harsh weather, lack of sanitation, starvation and disease. In 1943, as the impending liquidation of the ghetto became clear, a group of Jewish resistance fighters led by a young man named Mordecai Anielewicz, fought and held back the Nazi army for approximately a month, in the largest instance of Jewish organized resistance to Nazi persecution seen in the Holocaust.



### **Day 2: Warsaw Cemetery and Treblinka**

Today, our journey started in earnest. After breakfast, we travelled a short distance to the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. This cemetery is enormous in size, with over 82 acres. It has been in active use for over 200 years and was also used to bury victims of the Warsaw ghetto. There we visited the mass grave of victims of the Warsaw uprising and ghetto, the memorial to the Jewish children who perished and the grave Adam Czernikow, the controversial head of the Judenrat (Jewish council) who took his own life instead of sending 10,000 Jews to their death.

It was then a 1.5 hour bus ride to Treblinka.

This is a horrible place. A place where over 800,000 Jews were murdered. A place that was so efficient in their murder that the Nazis were able to dismantle the camp to try and hide the evidence. It is also a place of incredible beauty. Set in a beautiful forest, surrounded by towering pine trees, in any other place on earth, it would be a perfect place to camp. And here we addressed the juxtaposition of the beauty of nature to the destruction of human lives that was caused here.

We heard from Dorothy about the loss of her family at this place. We heard from Paula about how her whole family, especially her beloved sisters, Chaya and Chana, were murdered here. And we heard from Gabriella about the loss of life and each person was presented with a beautiful, hand-made leaf necklace that she personally made for each of the participants. And we had the opportunity to say Kaddish for Paula and Dorothy's families and communities that were wiped out on the very ground we were standing on. It was a powerful but very important day.

We are now back at the hotel getting ready to welcome in Shabbat. I will not be posting during Shabbat but will as soon as possible afterwards.

**Treblinka** – An extermination center built in 1942 in northeast Poland, to deal primarily with the Jews interned in the Warsaw Ghetto and surrounding regions. Approximately 870,000 people were murdered at this death camp. The camp was in operation until the fall of 1943, at which time the Nazis destroyed the entire camp in an attempt to conceal all traces of the crimes they committed there.



The Warsaw cemetery



The Delegation

### **Day 3: Shabbat in Warsaw**

Kabbalat Shabbat together was the Los Angeles delegation has been a very special time. Last night we welcomed in Shabbat with a special service led by Rabbi Sacks and accompanied by Happie Hoffman, our song leader. We then enjoyed a delicious (the food really has been much better than previous years) dinner together. Following dinner, the participants has time to hang together and enjoy each other's company, or, as many did, use the opportunity to go to sleep a little early since we had a late wakeup call on Saturday.

Shabbat day started with 2 options. A group of about 30 students got up a little early, braved the light rain, and walked to the old, Nozyk shul (<http://warszawa.jewish.org.pl/en/nozyk-synagogue>), which is a beautiful structure that has been around over 110 years, and even though used as a stable by the Nazis, survived the war (the only synagogue of over 400 in Warsaw the survived the war).



There, the group joined with participants from other delegations in an Orthodox/observant service. The rest of the delegation had their own prayer experience back at the hotel, but both groups came together at ~11 am for a special program with our survivors (including a survivor accompanying the Mid-Atlantic delegation). Prior to the March, the survivors were asked to bring an important item with them and to share the story of the item and its importance with the kids. From pictures of their families (some being the only picture of their families in existence) to travel papers that got them out on the *kinder transport*, to a love letter sent by a survivors soon to be husband, the survivors opened up a part of their lives and experiences with the group. It was a very personal and moving program.

Warsaw at night

After lunch, the students had the option (since it was still raining) to have a walking tour of Warsaw. Most of the group took the opportunity (since it will probably never happen again for them) to go on the tour which included the famous Rappaport memorial, Mila 18 (the site of the Warsaw ghetto uprising), the *Umslagplatz* (the deportation center where the Warsaw Jews were herded into cattle cars and transported to Treblinka, and the newly opened Museum of the History of Polish Jews ([www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/en](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/en))).

After the walking tour and subsequent dinner, the entire delegation walked back to the Nozyk shul for *Havdallah* and a celebration of our survivors. We first heard from a Righteous Gentile whose family helped save a number of

Jews. She was greeted with a standing ovation following her remarks. We also brought in a *klezmer* band and along with our clarinetist, Randy Fried and our song leader, Happie, we brought some life to this historic building in honor of our survivors and in memory of those who are not able to. We sang, we danced, we hoisted our survivors up in chairs, and presented each of them with a gold medal to wear as they are our heroes and champions. The pictures you see are all from our post-Shabbat celebration tonight.

Tomorrow it is an early departure from our hotel for the 5-6 hour drive to Auschwitz and Krakow



Havdallah led by our survivors in the Nozyk synagogue in Warsaw













People ask me why I love my job, here's why - 190 teens and 10 survivors dancing, full of joy and life



## Day 4: Auschwitz - Birkenau

In preparation for the Worldwide March of the Living tomorrow, we travelled from Warsaw to Oswiecim, the town in which Auschwitz-Birkenau is located. It is a 5+ hour drive so this required an early (5am) wake up and 7am departure.

On the way to Auschwitz-Birkenau, different survivors spoke on different busses to continue our theme of telling the story one person at a time.

At Auschwitz, we went directly to Block 11 where Monise told us the stories of Freddy Diamant, a survivor who travelled with the LA delegation many times before his death, who watched his brother hanged by the Nazis in front of

him. She also told the story of Zigi Hart who also travelled with the LA delegation many times, who had promised to bear witness for Freddy and his brother, and now with the passing of both these great men, Monise served as the witness .

We were then toured around Auschwitz by tour guides and we congregated together at the remaining gas chamber and crematorium. A haunting and powerful sight. We then made the short drive to Birkenau, the death camp 1.5 miles from Auschwitz.



Eva sharing her story on the bus

It was here that over 1,100,000 Jews were murdered in a systematic way. Today we heard from a number of our survivors who spent time at Birkenau.

Jack spoke to the group about his time in Birkenau and how he watched his sister walk into the gas chamber and never walk out. Paula spoke about life in the camp as a child and what it was like to have been liberated. And Sidonia spoke about what it was like to live in a barrack, standing next to a bed she could have slept in. We then went to the gas chamber and crematoria that Jack's sister perished in and laid a wreath and said the Mourner's Kaddish and *El Molle Rachamim* in her memory.

We are now back in our hotel in Krakow, getting ready for bed and preparing ourselves for the March tomorrow.

**Auschwitz** – The Auschwitz concentration camp was opened in 1940 as a Polish POW internment center. As the Final Solution was coined and implemented by the Nazis, Auschwitz became a concentration camp for Jews and other 'undesirables' in 1942. Auschwitz expanded its facilities to include two additional sub camps, totaling 3 centers for persecution:

- Auschwitz → forced labor, experiments and torture
- Birkenau → death camp – killing facility primarily for Jewish prisoners
- Monowice → industrial sub-camp where inmates did factory work to aid the German war effort

Approximately 1.1 million people – primarily Jews, but also including Gypsies, homosexuals, Polish and Soviet POW's, handicapped and Jehovah's witnesses) – were murdered in these camps throughout the war years.

**Birkenau** – Birkenau, also known as 'Auschwitz II' was opened in March of 1942 as an extermination center primarily for the Jews of Eastern Europe. Over 1 million Jews were systematically murdered in the gas chambers of Birkenau throughout its three years of operation



Auschwitz

**Krakow** –Second largest and one of the oldest cities in Poland. Kraków has traditionally been one of the leading centers of Polish academic, cultural, and artistic life, and is one of Poland's most important economic hubs. It was the capital of Poland from 1038 to 1596, and has remained one of the most significant cities in the region since. After the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany at the start of World War II, Kraków was turned into the capital of Germany's General Government. The Jewish population of the city was moved into a walled zone known as the Kraków Ghetto, from which they were sent to extermination camps such as Auschwitz and the concentration camp at Płaszów.









## Day 5: Yom Hashoah – March of the Living



Today is the event, The March of the Living. When 11,000 people, Jews, non-Jews, children and adults, congregate at Auschwitz to walk out of the gates of the infamous camp and proclaim to the world, "we are still here."

The day started out with overcast clouds and some drizzle. A perfect start to what this day is all about. On the way to Auschwitz, we stopped in Krakow to hear about the Krakow ghetto and the story of how a pharmacist saved many Jewish lives.

We then drove to Auschwitz to meet with the rest of the delegations. Prior to entering the camp, the students were given placards to write messages for whom they are marching

They are then placed into the train tracks entering Birkenau. Also, as a nod to their strength and quality of the LA BJE delegation, 14 of our students were chosen to lead the entire March. It was great honor for these kids and our entire delegation.

As soon as the March began, the sky cleared and it was an amazingly beautiful day, a surreal juxtaposition to where we were and what happened at this horrendous place. And following a blast from the shofar, our 14 participants led the entire March out of the Auschwitz gates all the way to Birkenau. Seeing 11,000 people cram the streets of this little hamlet was an awesome and powerful sight. 11,000 silent people proclaimed "we are still here" with their feet and with their presence. 11,000 people said in one, loud voice, "Never Forget." And 11,000 people marched in honor and memory of those who did not have opportunity to walk out of those gates with their heads held high and proud of their heritage.

Once we arrived at Birkenau, there was a special ceremony to commemorate the occasion. From singing *Eli, Eli* to speeches by the president of Hungary and a taped message from the Prime Minister of Israel, we were reminded of the power of the day and the importance of the March. The ceremony ended with my favorite moment, when 11,000 stand and singing Hatikvah.

The sound of Israel's national anthem sung in one powerful voice is stirring and life affirming. To me, it answers the question of why we are there. And it serves as the ultimate answer to everyone who has tried to wipe our people off the face of the earth.

### **We shall never forget!**

**Plaszow Concentration Camp** – The concentration camp of *Plaszow* was originally designed as a work camp; however, like many other Nazi camps, shortages of food existed, prisoners starved or were worked to death, or were summarily shot for no reason. The camp was in operation from December 1942 until January 1945. Over 9,000 victims were murdered in this forced labor camp.

**Oskar Schindler** – A German industrialist who was an active member of the Nazi party at the outbreak of WWII. Initially Schindler supported the Nazi party because of the great financial success it brought him as a businessman; however, as the war years progressed, and he saw the cruelty with which the Nazis treated Jews and other parties, he could no longer stand idly by. He used his personal finances

to purchase Jewish workers from the *Plaszow* work camp and Krakow ghetto and gave brought them to work in his factory– ultimately saving them from certain death at the hands of the Nazis. Oskar Schindler is credited with saving over 1,100 Jews during the Holocaust by employing them in his enamelware and ammunitions factories









sadlejustin

So privileged to be marching with 10 amazing survivors, including this man, Bob Geminder





### **Day 6: Tarnow & Lublin**

It was hard to imagine you could follow up yesterday's International March of the Living. It turned out today was also an incredibly emotional and powerful day.

We left Krakow early in the morning to head towards Lublin, our last stop on the Poland leg of our journey. On the way we stopped in Tarnow which used to be 50% Jewish. We stopped at the Jewish cemetery where the family of one of our survivors, Bob Geminder, was buried. He had hoped that we could help locate the gravestones of his family, but unfortunately the cemetery was very overgrown and it was impossible to locate his family gravestones.

We then left the cemetery and made a short drive to the forest in **Zbylitowska Góra**. It was here that 800 Jewish children were brought from the city of Tarnow, driven in trucks and murdered in one mass grave.

Tarnow cemetery



We stood at that mass grave and paid tribute to those lost lives. At the end of our ceremony, we unfurled our huge March of the Living tallis and recited the parent's blessing over the children.

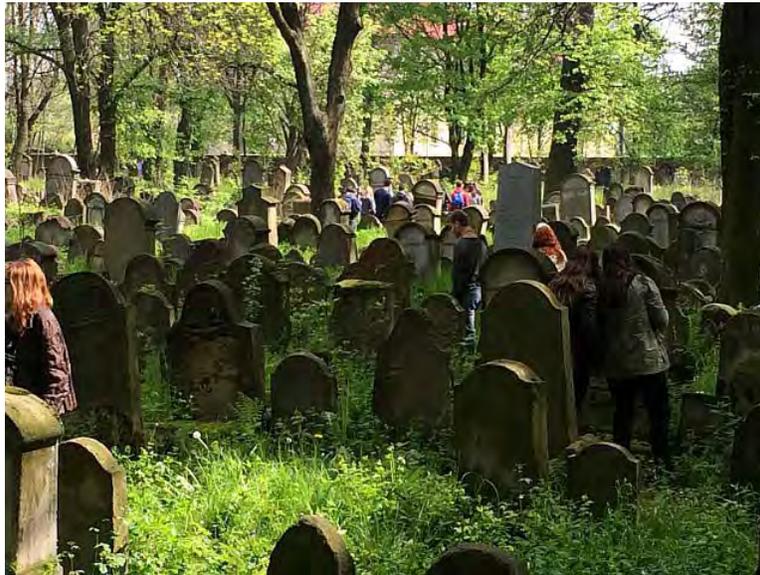
The participants then wrote notes and reflections to the children whose lives were lost so that they knew their names would always be remembered and for a blessing.

There was not a dry eye in our delegation as we then made two lines and allowed our survivors to walk between these two lines as they would exit from a Jewish funeral.

Who knows why, maybe because our participants could relate to kids close to their age, or because of everything they have experienced during the last five days in Poland, but this may have been the most powerful of all our moments in Poland so far.

We then made a very long drive to Lublin where we are staying overnight until tomorrow when we will have our last day in Poland. Tomorrow night we fly to Eretz Israel!













**bjemotl**

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14 hours ago

#motl2014 #bjemotl "There had to be 100 or more incidents that had to be a 'yes' for someone to survive. I call them miracles." Bob Geminder shares his story of his, and his family's, survival.

♥ youhadme\_at, nshoumer, lischreibe and 7 others like this.



**bjemotl**

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1 week ago

#motl2014 #bjemotl Gabriella Karin shares her story of survival. #Repost from @apolsky1 --- "I learned so much from reading... Everything can be taken away from you, except what is in your head. So put good stuff in it" Gabriella Karin #bjemotl

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**bjemotl**

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2 days ago

#Motl2014 #bjemotl. Survivor Bob Geminder tells his story at the Tarnow Cemetery, where his family is buried. #Repost from @apolsky1 --- Bob Geminder speaks to #bjemotl at the Tarnow cemetery where his family is buried.

youhadme\_at, nshoumer, debmalach and 5 others like this.



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## Day 7: Lublin



For the last day, the only major thing on our itinerary was a stop at Majadanek. This concentration camp was renowned for its brutality. In the city of Lublin, this concentration camp was liberated by the Russians so quickly that most of the structure are still standing. From the Barricks to the gas chambers to the crematoria, this looks like it could be up and running within 24 hours. As such, this camp has an incredibly creepy feeling to it.

After sitting under the enormous monument and getting some context of this site from our historians, participants spent the next hour exploring the barracks, the exhibits, and the crematorium and gas chambers. After our exploration, we all met at a outdoor mausoleum.

Under this enormous dome sat the ashes of at least 60,000 Jews who were killed and cremated and then exhumed at this site. In this huge pile of ash you can still see bones and other articles that clearly indicates these were once living beings. To bring honor and

memory back to these victims of the Holocaust, our delegation encircled the entire mausoleum and said Kaddish and El Molle Rachamim for these victims as well as sand Oseh Shalom.

We then gathered at the steps of the mausoleum to hear a recording from the BBC five days after the liberation of the Bergen Belson concentration camp. In this recording, the newly liberated Jews were heard singing Hatikvah. In response, our delegation stood as one and also sang Hatikva. This was a perfect segue from our week in Poland and our upcoming trip to Israel.

Finally, the letters that the parents wrote to each of their children were distributed. Participants were asked to spread out and spend a moment totally alone with these letters and have a moment to understand their parents dreams, wishes and hopes for them. Watching the participants it was clear that this was a really important and profound experience for them.

It was then time to board buses head towards the airport and make our way to the land of Israel.

### **Am Yisrael Chai!**

**Lublin** – The 9<sup>th</sup> largest city in Poland, Lublin was once a center for Jewish life and culture. Jews settled in Lublin starting in the early 1300's and continued to live prosperous successful Jewish lives up until Hitler's rise to power in the 1930's Lublin was taken over by the Nazis on September 18, 1939, and as a result of resettling the Jews from surrounding towns, the Jewish population doubled by 1941 to reach 45,000 – including 6,300 refugees from other cities. Once a city bustling with Jewish life, Lublin became a center of mass extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust.

**Majdanek** – Mass murder camp in eastern Poland. At first, Majdanek was a labor camp for Poles and a POW camp for Russians but it was eventually turned into a gassing center for Jews during the Second World War. It was liberated by the Red Army in July 1944, but not before 250,000 men, women, and children had been murdered there.







### **Day 8: Caesarea & Jerusalem**

At 2:50 am we landed at Ben Gurion Airport. As the wheels touched down in Eretz Israel, a huge cheer went up from our delegation. After a slow exit from the airport, we went to the beach and enjoyed ourselves in the Israeli sun and surf for a few hours, including a great Israeli breakfast.

Following that, we drove to Jerusalem and ate lunch at the Haas Promenade overlooking the Old City. From there it was to our hostel for dinner and an early, well deserved, night of sleep!

It definitely feels good to be in Israel!



Our tired day in Jerusalem



## Day 9: Ein Gedi & the Dead Sea

Today was a great Israeli day! We had a nice late wake up time after our long previous 48 hours, and after a great Israeli breakfast, we headed down south to Ein Gedi and the Dead Sea.

Here it was a day of pure enjoyment and relaxation. From hanging out at the shores of the Dead Sea, covering ourselves in mud, floating in the Dead Sea, to hiking in Ein Gedi and enjoying the waterfalls and fresh natural spring waters, it was very awesome, relaxing day.

Now, we are back in our youth hostel and having some relaxing free time and then getting ready for Shabbat. I will post again after Shabbat ends, probably on Sunday.

It is crazy to think that 48 hours ago we were standing in Majadanek and now we are enjoying the beautiful Jewish homeland of Israel.

Shabbat shalom





Ein Gedi Nature Preserve



## Day 10: Shabbat in Jerusalem

What an amazing Shabbat our delegation had in Jerusalem today. From very meaningful services Friday night to a great all-group dinner, to many options for services Saturday, it was wonderful and meaningful time for our delegation to be together and take a deep breath and contemplate our last 10 days together.

Saturday afternoon, we were entertained by a one woman play called "The Four Faces of Israel" which forced our participants to look at the very nuanced and complicated situation here in Israel from four different perspectives.

We then walked the 5.5 km to the Western Wall to celebrate Havdallah together. After that we walked to Ben Yehuda Street for some free time and then back to the hostel for a drum circle. An unbelievably fun way to usher out the Shabbat.

## Havdallah in Jerusalem







### **Day 11: Herzliyah & Erev Yom HaZikaron**

Today we met with Israeli students at IDC who's families immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia. We heard their incredibly inspirational and miraculous stories of immigration, and discussed what living in Israel, particularly today on *Yom HaZikaron*, means to them. You can see a picture of our staff member Eli with Kokit, who was a captain in the Air Force, and is now studying to become a lawyer.

This evening, in honor of *Yom HaZikaron* (Israeli Memorial Day), we had a *tekes* (ceremony) to pay our respects and remember those who have lost their lives defending the State of Israel. From telling individual stories to seeing a movie about an American young man who made aliyah and lost his life in Lebanon, our delegation paused to pay tribute and honor to those who put their lives on the line and paid the ultimate sacrifice to defend the Jewish homeland.



## Day 12: Yom HaZikaron & Erev Yom HaAtzmaut



BJE LA MOTL Erev Yom HaZikharon Ceremony



It's been a very busy two days for our delegation.

First had the honor of celebrating Yom HaZikharon in Israel. On this day, Israel remembers its soldiers who lost their lives serving their country. On this day, we brought in over 20 soldiers who all came to Israel from America to join the Israeli army. Included in this group were a number of soldiers from Los Angeles some of which had gone to either New Community Jewish High School or Milken High School. They talked to us about the reasons for joining this Israeli army and what this day means to them and their army units.

We then went for some free time on Shenkin streets to buy lunch and gifts and then we walked to the Dolphinarium the site of one of the first terror attacks in Israel which led to the deaths of almost 2 dozen young people

Then as what happens every year in Israel, the switch and it was time to celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut, and a chance for us to celebrate the founding of the State of Israel. After watching a slideshow of our last two weeks, we went to Rabin Square to celebrate this day with Israelis.

We then woke up this morning to travel back home first to hear a speaker, Neil Lazarus, speak about how to deal with the anti-Israel groups on campus, and then it was to the center Jerusalem for the March of the Living in Israel. Here we celebrated and danced in the streets of the Old City to the Western Wall to proclaim to the world that we are still here and that Hitler failed in his plan to eradicate the Jewish people.

We are now headed to Latrun for the last major ceremony this journey. It has been an amazing two weeks and I believe our students learned a lot about what happened and their role going forward. Hopefully you will hear amazing stories of who they talked to, where they've been and what they've learned. Thank you for sharing your participants with us as they have been an extraordinary group throughout this journey.

### **Day 13: Yom HaAtzmaut & The March of the Living in Jerusalem**

