

PARSHAT SHEMINI
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There were many moving moments on the recent trip of President Barack Obama to the State of Israel. From these shores we saw many highlights, including his speech at the Jerusalem Convention Center, Binyanei HaUma. However, from what I have read, seen and heard, the most moving moment took place at Yad VaShem, Israel's memorial museum to the 6 million of our brothers and sisters who were killed during the Holocaust. In addition to a tour of the museum and the laying of a wreath in the Hall of Memory, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, and now the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, spoke to the President.

Rabbi Lau thanked the United States of America for his life. He was the youngest survivor of Buchenwald and was saved by the advancing American forces who took over the camp from the Nazis. On April 11, 1945, General George S. Patton's Third Army liberated the concentration camp. Rabbi Herschel Schacter, who was attached to the Third Army's VIII Corps, was the first Chaplain to enter the camp. He commanded a jeep and driver left the headquarters and sped toward Buchenwald. By late afternoon, when Rabbi Schacter drove through the gates, Allied tanks had breached the camp. He remembered, he later said, the stinging of smoke in his eyes, the smell of burning flesh and hundreds of bodies strewn everywhere.

Rabbi Schacter's name was recalled by Rabbi Lau when he thanked the American army for saving his life. Rabbi Lau's memoir entitled *Out of the Depths: The Story of a Child of Buchenwald Who Returned Home at Last* was translated from the Hebrew less than two years ago. I read the book about three months ago. He tells a remarkable story of suffering and death; of survival and achievement. Rabbi Lau was born in Piotrkow, Poland where his father was the town's last Chief Rabbi. He was descended from an unbroken chain of rabbis spanning over 1,000 years. His memoir tells the terrible story of how his entire family was murdered during the Holocaust, with the exception of his brother Naphtali, and his brother Joshua and an uncle who had already emigrated. Rabbi Lau was saved time and time again by his older brother who eventually, as Naphtali Lavie, became an important member of the Israeli Foreign Office and served for many years in the United States. One harrowing experience after another seemed to descend on both of them. Somehow, Naphtali was able to keep his vow that he would protect his younger brother, Yisrael. When Buchenwald was liberated, little Yisrael Lau was eight years old. In his short speech to President Obama he thanked the United States and Rabbi Herschel Schacter for saving his life. In his memoir he tells the entire story.

According to Rabbi Schacter, when he entered the camp he encountered a young American lieutenant who knew his way around. "Are there any Jews alive here?" the Rabbi asked him. He was led to a little camp where in filthy barracks men lay on raw wooden planks stacked from floor to ceiling. "Shalom Aleichem, Yiden," Rabbi Schacter cried in Yiddish. "Thr Zint Frei" "Peace be upon you, Jews, you are free." He ran from barracks to barracks repeating those words.

Rabbi Lau reports in his book that he doesn't remember everything, and that some of the memories have been pieced together both by Rabbi Schacter and by others who were saved. As he passed a mound of corpses, Rabbi Schacter thought he saw a pair of eyes, wide open and alive. He panicked and, with a soldier's instinct, drew his pistol. Rabbi Lau recalls that Rabbi Schacter bumped into him, a little boy, staring at him behind a mound of corpses, wide-eyed. In Yiddish, Rabbi Schacter asked him, "How old are you, my boy?" Rabbi Lau replied, "What difference does it make? At any rate, I am older than you." "Why do you think you're older than I am?" Rabbi Schacter responded. Without hesitating, the little boy replied, "Because you laugh and cry like a child, and I haven't laughed for a long time. I can't even cry anymore. So, which one of us is older?"

As Rabbi Schacter introduced himself to this young boy the tone of the conversation eased. Rabbi Schacter asked who he was and Rabbi Lau responded using his nickname, "Lulek from Piotrkow." "And who was your family?" he inquired. "My father was the Rabbi of Piotrkow." "And you're here all alone, without your father?" "Without my father, without my mother. I have a brother. He collapsed and is lying sick, here in the camp." Rabbi Lau continues to report that Rabbi Schacter gained his full trust and told him that he had heard of his father and would do whatever he could to help him. After visiting all the bunkers, Rabbi Schacter helped the young boy find his brother, Naphtali, in the Buchenwald hospital where his brother was being treated for typhoid fever. "My name is Herschel Schacter," he said, "I am the army Rabbi for the division that liberated Buchenwald. I know who you are, I am going to help you and everything will be all right." He reassured Naphtali and concluded with a Mazal Tov. "Congratulations! We've gone from slavery to freedom."

Rabbi Lau's words in his abbreviated story to the President of the United States were most moving, his book which details his descent into Hell and then his ascent from Buchenwald and a DP camp to Palestine and, eventually, the position of Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, is truly remarkable.

What made the words even more remarkable is that the day before Rabbi Lau spoke to the President, Rabbi Schacter passed away in New York. At that time, Rabbi Lau did not know of his passing. For many years after his army duty Rabbi Schacter served as an Orthodox pulpit Rabbi in New York. He later became associated with Yeshiva University. He also served as chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and was very involved with the Soviet Jewry movement.

The story of Rabbi Schacter's saving deeds in Buchenwald, in which he not only changed the life of young Lulek, but literally saved the lives of many of the inmates of Buchenwald, is not to be forgotten. Especially, on the eve of Yom Shoah, it is our duty to recall not only those who perished during the Nazi onslaught, but those who withstood the Nazi killing machine and were survivors, as well as those who were liberators. As the years go by there are fewer and fewer of them, and their stories need to be told, to be recounted for future generations, for if they are lost, they will be lost forever.

In our own community, this week, we lost two survivors and one liberator. I was privileged to officiate at the funerals of Marie Lebovitz and Lola Nortman. Each was a survivor

with an amazing story of great courage, strength and resiliency. It was important that they tell their descendants their stories. It took many years for them to do so. I was privileged to receive from the family of Lola Nortman a review of her life. She wrote with her own hand the story of her life in Poland as it was occupied by the Germans, her stay in the concentration camps, and the death march to Bergen-Belsen. It is a remarkable story of courage and great resiliency as she met the challenges of the moment, later found some of her family members and moved to the United States where together with her husband, Ben, was able to establish a family and renew life's mission.

I heard a story from the family of Marie Lebovitz of her return, along with her husband, Simon, to the small Czech village in which she lived. She searched for the home in which she had been raised and found it. She marched up to the home, knocked on the door, and told the people who lived therein that she wanted to see the place. They slammed the door in her face, locked it and ran away.

These stories are central for our generation to learn and for the survivors to make us acquainted with them. For many years they didn't share them. When some decided to do so it was simply the passage of years, for others it was the made-for-TV movie Holocaust in the late 1970's, and for still others, it was the movie Schindler's list which brought them to tell their stories to those around them.

I also participated in the funeral of Major General William Levine who was a member here at Beth El, as well as at Moriah, and was one of the liberators of Dachau. I heard the story how he personally saved a young Belgian man who later recounted the story when he met the General many years later. For many years, like so many others, the General could not tell his stories. They were too terrible to recount. No one wanted to hear them and many people would not have believed them. Like many people in the last few years the General began to tell his stories to our Religious school and day school students, to students in public schools, to adults, and to those who needed to hear them so the tragedy would not be forgotten and the lessons would be learned for the future.

As the years move on the survivors are becoming fewer, the liberators are also fewer in number. Those who lived during that time will not be personal witnesses to give testimony to those of us who can only read about it, visit museums, or hear their stories. For many years, the stories were not told and it is only recently, in the last perhaps 30 years, that everyone has realized that the stories must be told, written and archived. It is an important task and one that needs to continue.

The Torah reading of this morning describes the terrible sequence of events that led to the death of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. The Torah does not detail exactly what they did to cause them to be struck down, it simply states that as they offered the Lord alien fire, "A fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord." Moses must then tell Aaron what had happened. Aaron's reaction is silence. There have been many interpretations given as to what this silence represents. Some have suggested that his anguish was too great for words to emanate from his mouth. Others see it as simple acceptance

of the decree of the Lord and the mistake of his young sons. Whatever the reason, Aaron never talks of it again. It remains a deep dark secret of his life to which he never responds publicly.

As the generations after the Holocaust have learned of the terrible plight of those who were killed and even those who survived, sometimes silence seems to be a proper response, for no words can adequately convey comprehension of what occurred. However, for the survivors and the liberators that should not be the case. Words and stories should be told and written so that future generations will understand the depravity to which human conduct can descend if given the opportunity.

The moving words of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau and the fact that his liberator had died the day before he uttered them, gives us recourse once more to understand the unfolding situation in front of us. Time is not on our side and we learned that in our community as well this week. We must learn the stories of that generation before they are silenced forever. We pray that no people, ever again, will have to endure what our people did 70 years ago. We also pray that we, all of us, shall be worthy of carrying on their memories and working towards the fulfillment of their dreams of a time of strength for the Jewish people and peace for all humanity.