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The Priest from Vilna

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Emil W. Herman ר׳ מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז״ל
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Shmini

The Priest from Vilna

The 27th of Nissan is Yom Hashoah, the international Holocaust Memorial day. As such, I would like to share with you a Holocaust story that only came to light recently.

One night, at the end of winter 1943 in a little town near Vilna, a young, disheveled woman pounded on the window of the home of Amelia Vashkinal. The young woman quickly handed over a small bundle wrapped well. Inside the bundle was an infant only a few days old.

That night had come after several secret meetings between Amelia and Batya, the young mother of the baby. Amelia couldn't have children, and Batya, who knew that her fate was already sealed, wanted to save her son at any price.

Amelia was afraid to take a Jewish baby. She told the baby's mother that if the story was discovered, they would kill her. She hesitated. Arguments arose in her mind for and against it. But when the baby was pushed into her arms, and she held it up to heart, the decision was made. Batya whispered the baby's name to her and disappeared into the darkness. "You had a very Jewish last name," the adoptive mother told her son when she revealed the secret after 35 years, "but I forgot it very quickly. I was afraid that it would be a death sentence—so I didn't want to remember anything from that night."

The boy got the name Romek from his adoptive parents, as well as their Polish surname, Vashkinal. And everything seemingly was stable: a house, a loving family, life—much more than a Jewish child could ask for in 1943. But Romek never felt safe or secure. The kindergarten kids were stronger than him. "I always felt different," he says. "In style and character, I never was the same to kids around me. Not to close and distant family. I had difficult stuttering problems. I was wimpy. I got pneumonia and jaundice. I ended up in the hospital. I had severe anemia. I lost teeth at a young age. If someone would yell at me, I would run to my mother immediately. When an airplane would fly overhead, I would throw myself on the ground. I never understood why, when I have no recollection from the war."

The Jewish shadow was awakened for the first time when he was five years old. "It had already started getting dark, and I was coming home one day. On the other side of the street were two gentleman, drunk as usual, and I heard them say, 'bastard Jew.' I didn't understand that it was intended for me, but when I looked at them, I saw that they were cursing me. I quickly ran home.

I was filled with fear and I couldn't say anything until I finally said that they had cursed me. And the first question I asked was, "Mommy, what's a Jew? And why are they calling me a bastard? I have a father and mother!" My mother didn't answer. She only hugged me, and I felt her crying."

"But the question remained: Who did I look like? I looked for a resemblance to my father everywhere. I once stood in front of the mirror and suddenly I found something that reminded me of my father, and I shouted, "Mommy, right I look like Daddy?" She looked at me and was silent.

And so, to convince himself that he was not a Jew, Romek decided at a very young age to seek refuge in a church and become a priest. "The happiest day of the week was Sunday. I would go with Daddy and Mommy to the church, one hand holding Mommy and the other hand holding Daddy, with me in the middle. I had gotten a few more coins as allowance and I gave them to the priest on the plate and he patted me on the head. That pat was worth everything. I was in seventh heaven."

In October of 1960, Romek began studying for the priesthood at a seminary. He was ordained in 1966. Romek only learned about the eradication of the Jewish Nation very late. Only in 1968 did he happen to find out about it. "Nobody spoke about it. Not in primary school. Not in high school and not in the priesthood seminary or in the Catholic university in Lublin. In university, I studied philosophy, where they talked about how people had died in the war—but not that they had exterminated Jews just because they were Jews. But then I got hold of a Polish history book. I read it all night and I cried, because then I understood that I really could be a Jewish child. And then, when there were outbursts of anti-Semitism in Poland and they were throwing Jewish students out of various universities, several students came to us and I looked at them and it seemed to me that I looked like them. That was the first thread of my secret."

That thread in his hand quickly turned into a flaming red thread that didn't give him any rest. In 1975, his mother came to live with him in Lublin and he began, gently and carefully, to ask her about the war period. She refused to take part. Romek saw yet another sign in this. "One day I read to her texts of Jews talking about the war years. She started crying, and I asked her, 'Tell me: Am I Jewish?' She asked, 'Do I not love you enough?' And I ran from the room so that she shouldn't see me crying. When I came back, she said that she didn't want to hear any more about Jews. For me, that was an answer."

For the next three years, Romek played a cat-and-mouse game with his mother. He would ask and she would flee—until February 23, 1978, when the game was over. Romek calls this day his second birthday. "I asked her who the natives had been in our village in Lithuania. The village had been a shtetl and most of the area was Jewish, and she started listing all kinds of nationalities, but she did not mention Jews. I asked her, 'And Jews?' And she burst out crying. I took both her hands in mine and I said, 'The time has come. This is my life. The only life I have. I have the right to know the truth. I will not love you any less because of it.' "

"And then she told me that I had had fine parents who had loved me very much and that they had been Jews who had been murdered, 'And I only wanted to save you from death.' My first question was what my name was, and she said that she didn't know. I felt like someone had dropped me from a plane into a desert. On the one hand I was curious. I wanted to know. On the other hand, I was afraid, and I expected her to deny everything."

"I asked her what she knew about my parents, and she only said that my father was a very good tailor, for which reason the Germans didn't kill him right away—because he worked for them. She also said that there was also a little boy around the house named Shmuel, and that the entire family found itself in the Vilna Ghetto, from which the mother and the boy were taken to the killing valley of Punor and the father to the Stuthof extermination camp."

Romek discovered his family name by accident—with the help of a nun who had come to him for confession and felt that he was in a more desperate situation than she. "You need not be afraid of anything," she told him. "If G-d is with you, you'll be alright."

"I went back to my room," Romek says, "and on the table was a note: 'If the priest would like to tell me something else, perhaps I can help.' So I went to her and she said, 'The priest is Jewish, correct?' And I exploded on her. 'How do you know? Is my nose not good?!' But she calmed me down and I burst out crying, telling her what I know about my parents."

In 1992, this nun visited Israel and heard that there was a reunion from the immigrants from Romek's parents' town. She want to the meeting, met many Jews and told the story. When she mentioned a tailor, somebody cried out, "That's Yankele Vexler!"

As it turned out, in the memorial book for the town there was a picture of Romek's mother Batya, and he found out that he had family in Netanya—his father's brother and sister.

That year, Romek visited Israel and found his life's direction. "At the airport, I realized that my uncle was a very religious Jew. The first thing he asked me in the car was, 'How can you be a priest which bears 2,000 years of hatred?' I turned cold, because I had no answer. I told him that I wasn't 2,000 years old—that I was only 49 and not only that, but I had come looking for you, not you for me. Then he took me to a synagogue, put a tallis on me and we prayed."

After visiting Israel, Romek decided to adopt his father's name Yaakov and start connecting with the Jewish child in his soul. Or, as he puts it, "I decided to do something with my treasure."

At that stage, his personal revolution wasn't yet over, but doubts began to creep in. He was caught in an impossible conflict: torn between the only heritage he knew—his parents who had raised him—and something new and unclear that flowed and connected into different pieces in the depths of his soul. It shook his spiritual and ideological world, and he decided to take an early leave from the university where he had studied and where he taught. "I couldn't bear any more. It wasn't good for me either at the university or in Polish society," he says.

Within two years he moved to Israel. And that, my friends, brings us to this week's Torah portion.

This week's Parshah is called Shmini—which simply means the number eight. So what does all that mean? And what does this inspiring Holocaust story have to do with it? Let's get a little Kabbalistic here.

The number seven symbolizes the order of nature, because the physical universe was created in seven days. The number eight, on the other hand, symbolizes the supernatural—that which has no rational explanation, that which is higher than intellect.

That is why bris milah, circumcision, is on the eighth day after birth—because circumcision is a connection with G-d given to the baby before it has any cognition. This is the covenant that G-d makes with us without our consent; it's a connection that doesn't need the person's agreement.

And that's what we see in the story of Romek, now Yaakov Vexler.

The fact that a Jew can feel on his own, since childhood, that he is a Jew, and move to Israel at age 66, shows us that our survival doesn't have to do with the number seven, the order of nature, but rather, with the number eight, the supernatural.

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