



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Shmini

## Against All Odds

In the city of Haifa in modern-day Israel lives a 92-year-old woman who was a Holocaust survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp. She is deaf and walks with a walker. Her daughter reads books to her out loud, and most recently, her daughter chose to read to her the biography of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau. In the book, they read together the following stories.

Rabbi Lau, like her, is not just a Holocaust survivor, but a Buchenwald survivor, too. According to his account, he is the youngest known survivor of Buchenwald. At the time of liberation, he was all of eight years old.

Rabbi Lau testifies that he remembers almost nothing that happened to him during those terrible three years—it's all been erased from his memory. But what he does know is what other, older, survivors have told him, who remember what happened to him during those years.

In the year 1978, Rabbi Lau was offered the chief rabbinate of the city of Netanya. He was invited to an interview with the mayor and city council members, and he sat with them for four hours. But during the interview, he noticed that one of the participants was an older man who just sat there and didn't open his mouth.

When they were ready to end the meeting, the man suddenly addressed the gathering and asked to say a few words. He related that he was Holocaust survivor of Buchenwald and that he remembered that on April 11, 1945, the day of liberation, he and the other survivors noticed that U.S. Air Force planes were flying overhead.

All the prisoners burst from their barracks and spontaneously ran over to the camp's main gate, expecting to be liberated. But then, while they were running, a hail of bullets cut them off. They had no idea where they were being fired from, who was firing at them and why—but they knew that their lives were in danger.

Suddenly, he saw a little boy running next to him. He jumped on him, knocked him to the ground and lay down on top of him to protect him from the gunfire.

And then, the man turned to the city council members and declared: "And this boy from Buchenwald stands before you here today."

But it gets better. He continued and said: "If I, David Anilevitch, could be rescued from doom, make aliyah to Israel, fight in the War of Independence, get to the office of mayor of an Israeli city, and merit that the little boy whom I protected with my very body become the rabbi of my city, then I say to you," and here he pounded the table hard, "that there is a G-d!"

Several years later, Rabbi Lau participated in a convention of American Holocaust survivors. The convention was held on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April to emphasize the role of the American Army in

liberating the Buchenwald concentration camp. And the convention was attended by no less than the American President himself, Ronald Reagan.

At the convention, there spoke a Jew by the name of Hershel Shechter, who had been the Jewish chaplain of the Army division that had liberated Buchenwald. Rabbi Shechter related that on the day of liberation, he pulled up to Buchenwald in a Jeep, climbed out and entered the camp, and discovered before his eyes a horrible sight that no one in the world believed could be.

Rabbi Shechter found himself standing before a pile of bodies, many of which were still actually bleeding and some of which were still alive. It suddenly seemed to him that he saw a pair of living and wide-open eyes. He was very shocked, and he quickly moved around the pile until he caught sight of a little boy. He pulled him out of the pile of bodies, lifted him into his arms, hugged him and burst into tears.

Rabbi Shechter asked him, “How old are you?” The boy answered, “I’m older than you—you can laugh and cry like a child, but I haven’t laughed for years now, and I can no longer cry, either.”

This boy was Rabbi Lau. After the story, President Reagan walked over to Rabbi Lau, shook his hand and said, “I just wanted to shake the hand of a living legend.”

But back to the story. Hershel Shechter asked him what his name was and if he had relatives in Buchenwald. Little Yisrael Lau told him that he had an older brother who at the time was sick in bed in the camp. So they went together to one of the barracks where his brother Naftali was lying sick with typhus. Rabbi Shechter approached him and told him that he would help him and that everything would be alright—concluding with the statement, “Mazel tov! We’ve gone out from slavery to freedom!” (*Al Tishlach Yadcha El HaNa’ar*, pg. 70.)

Now this elderly survivor being read this story by her daughter suddenly identified herself in the account.

She had been 23 years old at the time, and had been in the same barracks in Buchenwald as Rabbi Lau’s brother—and she remembered the little boy who had come to visit his older brother, and it was she who had given him food because he was hungry and pitiful.

So that very week, Rabbi Lau and this survivor met. The joy was great, and the woman said to the rabbi, “You see? We beat them! I was saved, and I have grandchildren and great-grandchildren already! We won!”

My friends, we just came from Purim—the holiday on which we celebrate all the deliverances experienced by the Jewish Nation. There were many Jewish communities throughout Jewish history that were saved from pogroms or expulsions, and the days on which they were rescued were established by each individual community as days of joy for all generations, being called “Purim” of that city or community. There is the Purim of Egypt, the Purim of Istanbul, and so on and so forth.

Now the Purim holiday itself was established in the merit of Mordechai and Esther, as we read at the end of the Megillah: “And Queen Esther and Mordechai the Yehudi wrote... to perpetuate these Purim days.” And then it says, “And the word of Esther endured, the records of these lots, and were written in a scroll.”

The Rebbe explains that, based on the Talmud Yerushalmi, it seems that Mordechai and Esther had asked the Sages of the Sanhedrin, “Establish me for the generations”—they had requested that the Sages establish the day of rescue from Haman as holiday for all generations of the Jewish Nation, and that this is what we know as “the Holiday of Purim.” But Queen Esther wasn’t satisfied with this—she had an additional demand: “Esther sent a message to the Sages: ‘Inscribe me for the generations.’” (Likutei Sichos Vol. 16, pg. 352.)

What she had asked was that the entire story be written in a sefer, a scroll, and that this scroll become part of the canon, the Tanach. At first, the Sages rejected her request, arguing to her that “You are provoking resentment upon us from the nations of the world”—“That the nations will say that we’re happy to recall their downfall,” as Rashi explains it. Why record the story and anger the Persians when they see that we’re happy at their downfall?

But Queen Esther answered them: “I’ve already been recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia.” In other words, the story is already known regardless, and there’s no reason to hide it.

So the Rebbe asks, why indeed was Mordechai satisfied about establishing the day of Purim as a holiday for all generations, while Esther was not satisfied with just a holiday but insisted that the story of rescue be recorded in a scroll.

But the explanation is that Mordechai was the president of the Sanhedrin, and his primary function was to work with the Jewish community—and so for him, it was enough to establish a holiday, because the moment it became a holiday, the Jewish Nation would always remember the miracle, the same way we celebrate the holiday of Chanukah and remember its miracles without a megillah.

But Esther was the queen of “One Hundred and Twenty-Seven Provinces” in which non-Jewish citizens lived, and whose citizens would not be celebrating the holiday of Purim. So to her, the only way to guarantee that even the non-Jews would also remember the Purim miracle would be to record it in a scroll that would become a part of the Tanach. And then the miracle would be known among the nations of the world, too. (Based on the Sichah of Purim 5724, Toras Menachem, Vol. 39, pg. 160.)

A study was recently done that found that people who acknowledge their parents’ history, and who embrace their grandparents’ stories, etc., are more self-assured and comfortable with who they are.

And so, my friends, the lesson is that each one of us must begin writing our personal megillahs—the stories we heard from our grandfathers and grandmothers about how they were saved from the Holocaust or the difficulties they overcame as Jews.

Anyone who interviews their parents will discover stories of Jewish sacrifice. These stories are the adrenaline of the Jewish Nation; they are what give future generations the power to withstand all obstacles and overcome them.

So when you remember what your ancestors went through in his life and still didn’t give up, it gives you strength to stand strong, to overcome and to win.