



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY JULY 27 / ט"ז מנחם אב

PARSHA:

EKEIV / עקב

SERMON TITLE:

The child in Buchenwald

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman **ע** ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Eikev

The child in Buchenwald

Many of you may have heard of Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the former Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel. Some of you may have even heard that he is a Holocaust survivor.

What you may not have known is that he may have been the youngest person to survive the notorious Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald.

Rabbi Lau was all of five years old when World War II broke out. His older brother Naftali, who was 13 at the time, protected him throughout the war.

When the Lau brothers arrived at Buchenwald, Naftali was 15—and Yisroel was seven. Naftali hid Yisroel in a sack and smuggled him into the camp—because if the Nazis found a little boy alive, they'd shoot him on the spot. At Buchenwald, you either worked or you died. The Nazis had no use for people who couldn't work—especially children. So Naftali smuggled his brother into the camp with him, where he could watch over him and keep him alive.

Buchenwald was divided into different sections. One part housed Jewish prisoners. Other parts housed Russians or other prisoners—as long as they weren't Jewish. These prisoners got much better treatment than the camp's Jewish prisoners.

For that reason, Naftali succeeded in sneaking his brother Yisroel into the Russian section of Buchenwald, where he was left all alone. At that time, Rabbi Lau was just a little boy known as Lolek. His parents had already been killed, and the one person left in his world was his brother Naftali. And now, even Naftali left him.

But while Lolek was alone in Block 8, a 17-year-old Russian non-Jew named Feodor found him. Feodor immediately adopted Lolek, forging a strong bond with the child and serving him faithfully. Feodor would steal potatoes to secretly boil a little soup and give the little boy something to eat.

Feodor also found a sweater that had belonged to a prisoner who had died at Buchenwald. He unraveled it and turned pieces of it into makeshift earmuffs for Lolek. This was because the Nazis would wake up the prisoners before dawn and force them to stand in roll calls in the freezing cold, sometimes for hours on end. It would sometimes be well below zero, and the prisoners would have only thin shirts and camp-issued pants without socks. On top of that, they would be ordered to remove their hats. So Feodor was very concerned that the little boy's ears didn't freeze, G-d forbid—so he knitted him the earmuffs.

Every night, Feodor would come to Lolek's bunk to verify that he hadn't forgotten to put on the earmuffs so that he'd be ready for the next day.

Over the course of eight months, Feodor tended to Lolek with endless devotion. And then, liberation day came.

On that day, the prisoners suddenly heard American planes zooming overhead and strafing the camp from all sides. At the same time, the Nazi soldiers in the guard towers started shooting at the prisoners in a burst of rage, and in all the chaos, the prisoners began running toward the main gate to escape from the inferno that was Buchenwald.

But the gate was locked—and all the prisoners who dashed for the gate were gunned down.

Lolek had also run towards the gate. But suddenly, Feodor came out of nowhere, grabbed him and flung him to the ground, and threw his own body on top of Lolek to shield him—so that if any bullets came their way, he would take them first and save the boy's life.

Fortunately, neither of them was hit.

After the liberation, Lolek's brother Naftali, who had also miraculously survived, came over to take his brother, and together, they went to Israel.

After that, Lolek and Feodor lost contact. For over 60 years, Rabbi Lau searched for the Russian prisoner who saved his life—but he didn't even know his last name. All he knew was that his name was Feodor and that he had come from Rostov—nothing else.

Over the course of the years, Rabbi Lau met with representatives of the Russian government, who sincerely tried to help him—but go try to find a Feodor in Rostov without knowing his last name! That’s like trying to find one particular Bob in Texas without knowing his last name—only knowing that he came from Houston.

But a few years ago, the German government released hundreds of thousands of Nazi records from Buchenwald. With their release, Professor Kenneth Waltzer of Michigan State University found a document in which the Nazis wrote that they need to find out why a Russian prisoner Feodor Mikhailchenko was helping a Jewish boy named Lolek. It was very suspicious behavior. After further research, the professor discovered that the little boy in question was none other than Rabbi Lau himself.

Upon finding out about it, Rabbi Lau immediately contacted the Chabad rabbi in Rostov. The Chabad rabbi told the story in his synagogue, saying that Rabbi Lau was looking for a person named Feodor Mikhailchenko. Upon hearing the rabbi, one of the older men got up and said, “I knew him! He was my friend from before the war! He would always talk about how he helped a Jewish kid.”

Unfortunately, Feodor Mikhailchenko had already died at that point—but he had left two daughters. Both of them lived in Rostov.

So the daughters were tracked down, and they said that yes, indeed, their father had always talked about saving a Jewish boy named Lolek. He had always said that he had wanted to adopt him as a son, and then they would have a little brother in the house.

Several days later, Feodor’s daughters found themselves sitting in Rabbi Lau’s house in Tel Aviv. Rabbi Lau gathered his children and grandchildren and told the daughters, “All this is because of your father. When he saved me, he saved all these generations to come.”

Last year, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, officially honored Feodor Mikhailchenko as one of the “Righteous Among the Nations.” His daughters were presented with a special medal and certificate, and the name of Feodor Mikhailchenko was eternally enshrined at Yad Vashem.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read the second section of the Shema. Last week, we read the first.

Now, when we compare these two sections, we discover something strange. In the first section, G-d charges us with the mitzvos of tefillin and mezuzos. And then, at the end of the second section, G-d again gives us the mitzvos

of tefillin and mezuzos. Why does the Torah give us the same mitzvos twice? The Torah always uses as few words as possible—and here, one parshah after the other, the Torah says the same mitzvos!

What is new about this week's Parshah that the Torah found it right to repeat the mitzvos of tefillin and mezuzah?

What is new about the second part of Shema is *golus*, the concept of exile—the possibility that Jews will be banished from their land.

When Jews hear about exile, they immediately ask G-d, "How will we stand strong among the nations? Who will protect us throughout all the years of exile? Where will we find a Feodor who will shield us?" Along comes the Torah and repeats the mitzvos of tefillin and mezuzos—about which Rashi says that the Torah wants to tell us that "even after you are exiled, be particular about these mitzvos: put on tefillin and make mezuzos."

Essentially, G-d is answering the Jewish People's question: "I have two shields for you that will protect you in exile—tefillin and mezuzos."

When it comes to mezuzos, everyone knows that a mezuzah protects a Jewish house and a Jewish household. That's why one of the Names of G-d written on the scroll of the mezuzah is an acronym for "Guarding the Doors of Israel."

But tefillin are also related to protection. In the Talmud (Tractate Brachos 6a), the Sage Rabbi Eliezer the Great tells us, "The verse, 'And all the nations of the world shall see that the Name of G-d is invoked upon you, and they shall fear you,' refers to the tefillin on the head"—meaning that when a Jew puts on tefillin, he instills fear and terror upon our enemies.

Thus, G-d is essentially telling us, "Even when you find yourselves in exile, you'll have two protectors."

Now, these protectors are good for those Jews "banished to the land of Egypt," a verse from the Prophets which refers to Jews in physical exile, living under oppression. However, they are also for those Jews "lost in the land of Ashur," another clause in that same verse that refers to Jews in spiritual exile, living under assimilation.

Jews "lost in the land of Ashur" are those who are exiled to democratic, free countries like the United States and other Western countries. But even in such countries, Jews need protection against exile—against the dangers of assimilation and ignorance, against the danger of losing or forgetting one's Jewish identity. For such a danger, we have these two guards: tefillin and

mezuzos. When we have the mezuzah on the door, everyone knows that here is a Jewish home. It reminds everybody of just what kind of a house he or she is in: a Jewish house. And the same thing applies to tefillin: they are a daily reminder for the Jew which strengthens his connection with G-d.

The Rebbe chose these two mitzvos to make into mitzvoyim, mitzvah campaigns—because these two mitzvos have been shown to strengthen Jewish identity while the Jew is in exile.

Additionally, keeping the mitzvos of tefillin and mezuzah during exile are not just obligations but also “insurance.”

So that a Jew can keep the mitzvah of mezuzah, he must have a home of his own—and in order to keep the mitzvah of tefillin, he needs to have peace of mind to be able to concentrate. So along comes G-d and promises that even if we go into exile, we will not become gypsies wandering from place to place, exiled without homes. On the contrary—even in exile, we will be successful and we will have homes, and even in exile, we will have enough peace of mind to be able to fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin to perfection.

Thus, when the Torah repeats the mitzvos of tefillin and mezuzos in the second part of Shema, it is essentially the best news possible and the best guarantee we could get. It tells us that even in exile, we will be able to keep these mitzvos.

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