



Legacy

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The first time I heard a Holocaust survivor speak I was a student on a school field trip to a local Jewish museum. When the speaker was introduced I was surprised to see a familiar face—the Hazzan from my own synagogue—standing at the front of the room. Cantor Isaac Goodfriend spoke about his life.¹ He told us how he was raised in an observant Hassidic home until, at the age of sixteen, he was interned in a Nazi labor camp in Piotrkow, Poland, before escaping to a farm, where he was hidden until the end of the war. This testimony came to me, not as facts on a page, but directly from a person I knew, the person whose voice I first associated with prayer.

The Shoah is a deep and inescapable part of my spiritual life. For many Jews today, the Holocaust is perhaps as central, powerful, and important a chapter in the Jewish story as the exodus from Egypt. There is no Judaism—no understanding of Jewish history or culture or theology—without accounting for this tragedy. The Shoah is now an anchor of our Jewish story. This part of the Jewish story is now canon.

¹ You can watch video of his testimonies here:
<https://www.gpb.org/wwii-oral-history/wwii/isaac-goodfriend.html>



For the past eighty years, we have encountered this story directly from the people who endured it. During rabbinical school, I spent a summer visiting home-bound elderly in their apartments on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. One woman I visited, a Shoah survivor who lived alone, showed me a tiny old photo as she told me how she was separated from her family. She spoke to me about fear of God in a way I have never heard from anyone else. She shared that she never ate *treif* food, not even in the camps, because she needed to believe that someday the war would end and she would again be reunited with her mother. At the reunion she would tell her mother how she had not abandoned her *kashrut*, that she had stayed loyal to God. She never did see her mother again, but continued to keep kosher, on the chance they will meet in the next world. She was clear that her commitment to *kashrut* did not come from love or devotion, but from a place of fear. She called it *yir'at shamayyim* (a traditional phrase meaning fear of God). This fear haunted her. When I encounter the religious concept of *yir'at shamayyim*, I think of her.

My religious identity is informed by these interactions with survivors. When I pray Adon Olam, I hear my Hazzan's voice echoing. When I contemplate fear of God, I see this woman pulling on her hair as she described the immensity of her fears. Many people of my generation and older hold images like these. We remember the Torah we learned from the survivors in our lives. We hear their voices and lessons clearly, even years later.

In the years since the Shoah, we have lived alongside the survivors. They have been our neighbors, our leaders, our teachers, our community members, our friends, and in many cases our parents and grandparents. Their influence on my life—on our lives—has been immeasurable. When this last generation of survivors are gone, what will change? How will their absence impoverish us? How will their memory and lessons live on?



Our tradition offers us one model from which we might learn how to keep their stories and lessons alive after they are gone. Perhaps we will remember them the way we remember our patriarchs and matriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. Within the story of the Jewish people, these three generations were also unique, their lives and memories altering the Jewish story forever. The Talmud (Berakhot 16b) tells us that the designation of Avot and Immahot, patriarchs and matriarchs, applies **only** to these three generations.

Only Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are Avot. Only Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah are Imahot. There is a uniqueness to these generations. The Avot and Imahot are deeply a part of us. A distinctive intimacy to our relationship with the patriarchs and matriarchs carries them through centuries and brings them into our hearts and souls, placing their names and stories eternally in our mouths and homes. They no longer walk among us, but we learn from them daily, turning to their lessons to guide us. We call on them in moments of fear and doubt.

Like the Avot and Imahot, the generation of survivors will become part of us. They are not just another link in the thousands of years of transmission of an ancient and beloved tradition. The things they endured in the Shoah and the lives they have lived since then changed what Judaism is. The Judaism they have passed to their children is different from the one they inherited. As the last survivors pass away, a certain chapter of the Jewish story is ending that cannot and will not be picked up by the new babies being born. It is over. When there are no longer any living Shoah survivors, Judaism will be forever different. Their stories will be no less powerful and important, but the way we relate to them will change.

Like the Avot, the generations of the Shoah will take up places in our hearts. We will hold them with us in everything we do from now on. As with our Avot and Imahot, their stories



have become a primary lens through which we view and understand the story of our people, and we sense that the same will be true for our own descendants, for generations to come.

Perhaps no one has illustrated this connection more clearly and hauntingly than Israeli poet, Haim Gouri, in his poem *Heritage*. He draws a direct line from Isaac in the Akeidah to Shoah survivors, to us, and continuities straight through to every future generation:

Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed.

יִצְחָק, כְּמִסְפָּר, לֹא הֶעֱלָה קֶרְבֵּן.

He lived for many years,

הוא חי יָמִים רַבִּים,

saw what pleasure had to offer, until his eyesight dimmed.

רָאָה בְּטוֹב, עַד אֹר עֵינָיו כָּהָה.

But he bequeathed that hour to his offspring.

אָבֵל אֶת הַשָּׁעָה הָהִיא הוֹרִישׁ לְצֶאֱצָאָיו.

They are born

הֵם נוֹלָדִים

with a knife in their hearts.

וּמֵאֲכֶלֶת בָּלֶבָם.²

With the one word title, Gouri teaches us: This is our heritage. We live with the knife of Isaac and that of the Shoah. This is our burden, and it is our inheritance.

At the age of twenty-three, just out of college, I was given the honor of leading a Yizkor service in a congregation in Atlanta. An older man, a regular at *minyan*, already well past eighty, joined me at the bimah to recite the memorial prayer for those lost in the Shoah. He was a survivor himself. These losses were his. His entire body shook as he chanted, reverberating with the power of the prayer. I remember him holding onto the table for stability. His connection to those lost was immanent and all-consuming. He offered us a direct bridge to the souls for whom we prayed.

² https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/ktav_et/maamar.asp?ktavet=1&id=434. Translation from: https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-3329_HERITAGE





As a young adult, I wondered how I merited to be standing next to this man, praying together, side by side. My generation was raised amidst survivors—we witnessed and learned from them directly, we loved and prayed with them. My children won't have this particular merit. But the stories will still be theirs, the burdens and the lessons.

The rabbis in the Talmud tell us that only three generations can be called Avot and Imahot. After that we are all called “ben/child.” From now on, we are all post-Shoah Jews. We carry the legacy.

