Do Not Harm the Child

Selected Excerpts from Rabbi Israel Meir Lau’s Newly Translated Memoirs
Translated by Shira Leibowitz Schmidt and Jessica Setbon

In this remarkable autobiography, Rabbi Israel Meir Lau tells the story of how he rose from the ashes of the Holocaust to become the chief rabbi of Israel. As a young boy nicknamed Lulek, he is saved from the Nazi inferno by his older brother Naphtali, who fulfills their father’s dying wish to ensure the continuation of the family rabbinic dynasty. At age eight, Lulek, the youngest survivor of Buchenwald, sails to Israel, where he begins his life anew. Encouraged in his studies by such rabbinic giants as the Rebbe of Gur and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, young Israel Meir enters the yeshivah world and is eventually appointed Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel. In his book, he recounts fascinating vignettes from his career that reveal his life-long mission of commemorating the Holocaust from the standpoint of deep faith. The excerpts that follow offer the reader a taste of Rabbi Lau’s memoirs, which are soon to be published in English.

Shira Leibowitz Schmidt has six children and eight grandchildren … so far. She is a lapsed engineer and co-authored Old Wine, New Flasks: Reflections on Science and Jewish Tradition (New York, 1997) with Nobel chemist Roald Hoffmann. She is currently affiliated with the Haredi College in Jerusalem and writes polemical articles on controversial issues for The Jerusalem Post.

Jessica Setbon, a native of San Antonio and a former member of the Harvard Sailing Team, is a mother of five who studied comparative religion in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Tel Aviv. She has lectured on translation challenges at Yad Vashem and the Israel Translators’ Association conference.

Shira and Jessica run a translation center in Netanya, Israel, called Mother Tongue.
First Memories: Devastation, Autumn 1942

At the beginning of the book, Rabbi Lau discusses his experiences when the Nazis invaded Poland. He speaks of the deep impression made upon him by his father, Rabbi Moshe Chaim, chief rabbi of the Polish town of Piotrkow. In this scene, the esteemed community leader maintains his dignity in the face of humiliation by the Gestapo.

The nightmare had begun to affect us in Piotrkow as well. It is the autumn of 1942. I, Lulek, a boy of five years and four months, short in stature, terrified. I stretch my neck as far as it will go in order to catch a glimpse of my father. He is standing in the Umschlagplatz, the assembly point for deportation, which is next to the Great Synagogue of our town, Piotrkow, Poland. Father, with his impressive beard and black rabbi's suit, stands in the center, surrounded by Jews.

We felt enormous tension that day as we stood in the assembly square in front of the synagogue. A threatening silence surrounded us. The captain of the Piotrkow Gestapo approached my father, a deadly look in his eye. He stopped, and pulling out his maikeh—a rubber club about three feet long—he began to beat my father on the back. As a child, I did not understand the issue of the beard so well or the symbolic meaning, one that had a powerful effect on morale.

Many years later, I heard the following from survivor Dr. Abraham Greenberg, who had been standing next to my father in the synagogue square. He heard Father remark to the Jews next to him, "I don't know why we're standing here with our arms crossed. Even if we don't have weapons, we should attack them with our fingernails."

I don't think standing around can save any of us. We have nothing to lose by trying to fight them." He had just finished his sentence when the maikeh of the Gestapo captain struck him on his back. As a child, I did not understand the issue of the beard so well or the significance of the order to shave it, but I did understand that they were beating my father.

I knew my father was the town's chief rabbi, and was admired and loved by all. I could not bear to see the beatings. It was the humiliation. I could not bear to see the beatings. It was the humiliation. I could not bear to see the beatings. It was the humiliation.

Throughout the war years, a Polish word went through my head—lachago, meaning "why?" What did we do to you to make you stomp on our souls in this way?
crime that this is our punishment? There was no answer. Only this: we were Jews, and they, the Nazis, saw us as the source of all evil in the world.

When a child sees his father being kicked with a Nazi’s boot and publicly humiliated, he carries that terrible picture with him for the rest of his life. Yet, on the other hand, I carry in my mind another memory as well—that instant in which Father, with astonishing spiritual strength, braced himself from falling and, refusing to beg for his life, stood tall once again before the Gestapo captain. For me, that image of his inner spiritual strength completely eradicates the helplessness that accompanied the humiliation.

**Herded into the Synagogue**

Soon after the incident with Lulek’s father, the Nazis rounded up the Jews of Piotrków and packed them into the town’s main synagogue. There they called out the names of those who were allowed to leave; those remaining inside were to be deported, destined for death. Through his mother’s resourcefulness, young Lulek’s life is saved, but his thirteen-year-old brother, Shmuel, is condemned to a bitter fate.

As order and discipline were second nature to the Germans, one of them shouted, “One of the people whose names I called did not go out!” Then they made an exact count of all those who had left, and checked them against their lists. One person had not left: my mother. Her maternal instinct aroused, she scrutinized the narrow passage between the two guards at the door. She planned our moves quickly and precisely. She grabbed me with one hand, and Shmuel with the other.

“Come here,” she ordered. We jumped to her. We didn’t need to be told that we must remain completely silent, and more importantly, keep as close as possible to Mother. The three of us had to meld together as one. She planned to smuggle us both out under the cover of darkness, as if we were part of her body. To keep the Germans from closing the door, she shouted while moving toward the exit, “I’m coming, I’m coming.” Walking sideways as one body, we shuffled out the door. But a group of three could not possibly pass through the narrow opening the Germans had left. I went out first, with Mother close behind me, and Shmuel behind her. But one German noticed that there was a bit more movement than there should be. Facing us, he raised both his arms together, and swung them down with all his might, one to the left and one to the right. Shmuel, who was on the left side, fell to the synagogue floor and had to go back inside. On the right side were my mother and I. The force of the blow hurled us into a puddle in front of the synagogue. The two of us were saved, but we were separated from Shmuel, and we never saw him again. Later we learned that he was sent to Treblinka that same day.

**Into Hiding: 1942**

Lulek’s childhood becomes a nightmare of hiding and fear, leaving an indelible mark on his memory and shaping his consciousness. As an adult, Rabbi Lau recalls the taste of the honey cookies mentioned here as symbolic of his Holocaust experience.

Father was not with Mother and me when the two of us hid at 12 Jerozolimskia Street, a building near our house, where he had arranged a hiding place for us. This large building had been filled with Jewish residents, who then abandoned it for reasons unknown to me. The floor of one room in the top story was littered with wooden boards; the entry to the attic was through this room. Mother and I crowded into the attic along with about ten other Jews. They were constantly darting frightened looks at me, as if threatening me to keep silent, and at my mother, as if blaming her for bringing me to the hiding place and possibly endangering their lives. At least that is how it seemed to me. I was barely five-and-a-half, and they feared I would cry noisily, or else call out “Mameh, Mameh,” giving them all away to certain death. They were busy thinking of ways to make the child keep silent, but the child never even made a peep. Before leaving our house, my mother had foreseen what was ahead of us, and baked my favorite honey cookies. She knew that when I ate them they would distract me. More importantly, they would fill up my mouth so I would be unable to make a sound.

Even today, many long years after those days of horror, when I close my eyes and yearn for those honey cookies, I can remember their wonderful taste. During trying times, this memory is my consolation; it is the drop of honey with which I sweeten bitter days.

At the same time, I remember clearly that I would look at my mother, my mouth full of cookies, with a penetrating glance that seemed to say, “Mother, this whole business of using the cookies to silence me is unnecessary. I know I mustn’t say a word, and therefore I intend to keep quiet. We have already been through all kinds of selections and although I am a child, I understand exactly what’s going on.” Like an animal with an acute survival instinct, I under-

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*Lulek on June 2, 1945, soon after he was liberated from Buchenwald.*
stood that I had to keep quiet until the fury subsided, and I had no intention of behaving like a small child in our hide-out.

**Buchenwald: January 1945**

When Lulek and his nineteen-year-old brother, Naphtali, arrived in Buchenwald, Naphtali feared that he would not be able to save Lulek’s life as he had succeeded in doing so far.

The rules of the camp were iron-clad, and chances were slim that they would allow a child of seven to stay with the men. But as usual, Naphtali did not give up. With the help of two friends, he wrapped me up in the feather quilt that Mother had supplied us with, and put me inside the sack he had carried with him since we had parted from her. As I was already used to transitions, to entering and exiting labor camps, he had no need to warn me to keep my mouth shut until it was safe to leave the sack. Despite my being so young, the procedure was clear to me. Like a rabbit, I jumped into the sack, curling up as small as possible, and that is how I entered Buchenwald with my brother. The Germans made the newly-arrived Jews stand in formation, arranging them in threes. From inside the sack, I heard the familiar commotion: the shouts of *schnell, schnell*—hurry, hurry—the maikeh club beatings and the barking of the dogs. I hunched on top of Naphtali’s back, motionless as a block of ice. Then I felt Naphtali removing the sack from his back and putting it down at his feet. A sharp, strange smell reached my nose, one that I did not recognize. Later I learned that this was chlorine, which the Nazis used as a disinfectant.

The Germans waved the maikeh threateningly, their ferocious dogs barking and biting. Veteran Jewish prisoners shaved the new arrivals and disinfected them in a filthy chlorine bath. When I got out of the sack, one of the guards, also apparently a prisoner, noticed me. He approached Naphtali and asked him what a boy like me was doing in this place, which was meant for adult men. Naphtali looked into his eyes and explained that the child had neither a father nor a mother. “What was I to do?” he asked. “Leave him outside in the snow, by himself?”

That guard gave us the first authorized proof of the methods of killing in the camp. In this place, he explained to Naphtali, there are no gas chambers, but there is a crematorium. “From that furnace,” he said, glancing toward it, “smoke billows twenty-four hours a day. All the muselman, those walking, robot-like skeletons, die there. Everyone who comes to this camp becomes a muselman,” he said. “It doesn’t matter if he’s five or fifteen, seven or thirteen. But,” added the prisoner-guard, “you should know that if this child can get to block number eight, he will be okay.” When he finished what he had to say, he turned his back on us, as if he had not seen a thing.

As he walked away, a German guard caught sight of me. Naphtali was terrified when he saw the German focus on me, and even more so when he asked, as the other guard did, what I was doing there. Accustomed by now to being in mortal danger, Naphtali took off his shoe and folded it in half, removing Father’s gold watch from the sole. It was the last remaining item from the treasures Mother had given us for emergencies. Naphtali threw the expensive watch at the guard, who bent down as if to tie his shoelace, and picked up the watch. Then he continued his patrol, ignoring the two of us.

A group of orphans from Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, wearing Hitler-Jugend (the Nazi youth movement) uniforms because there were no other clothes available. Lulek is the third from the right.
Other guards took me along with the entire group to block fifty-two. The sight before our eyes was horrifying. Thousands of people inhabited that crowded place, most of them Muslims, suffering from hunger and disease. People relieved themselves inside the block, and the stench was insufferable. Each morning the guards removed about forty corpses, the bodies of those who did not awaken.

Liberation: April 1945

Thanks to Naphtali and to a Russian inmate protector, Lulek survives the horrors of Buchenwald. When Buchenwald is liberated by American army forces, Lulek is discovered by Army Chaplain Rabbi Hershel Schacter.

In full army uniform, Rabbi Schacter got down from his jeep and stood before the pile of bodies. Many of them were still bleeding. Suddenly he thought he saw a pair of eyes, wide open and alive. He panicked, and with a soldier’s instinct, he drew his pistol. Slowly, carefully, he began to circle the pile of bodies. Then—and this I recall clearly—he bumped into me, a little boy, staring at him from behind the mound of corpses, wide-eyed. His face revealed his astonishment: in the midst of the killing fields, from within that sea of blood—suddenly, a child appears! I did not move. But he knew that no child in this place could be anything but Jewish. He holstered his pistol, then grabbed me with both hands and caught me in a fatherly embrace, lifting me in his arms. In Yiddish, with a heavy American accent, he asked me:

“Wie alt bist du, mein kindt?”

How old are you, my boy?”

I saw tears dripping from his eyes. Still, through force of habit, I answered cautiously, like someone perpetually on guard: “What difference does it make? At any rate, I’m older than you.” He smiled at me from behind his tears, and asked, “Why do you think that you’re older than I am?” Without hesitating, I 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?”

Then he introduced himself to me, and the tension subsided. Rabbi Schacter asked who I was. “Lulek from Piotrkow,” I replied. “And who is your family?” he inquired. “My father was the rabbi of Piotrkow.” “And you’re here all alone, without your father?”

Like an animal with an acute survival instinct, I understood that I had to keep quiet until the fury subsided.

“Without my father, without my mother. But I have a brother. He collapsed and is lying sick, here in the camp.”

Rabbi Schacter gained my full trust when he told me he had heard of my father. He had also heard of Father’s cousin, Rabbi Meir Shapira, the rabbi of Lublin, who had initiated the Daf Hayomi daily page program of Talmud study. I was thrilled.

Then the American rabbi took me by the hand, and together, we made the rounds of the bunkers, announcing the liberation. I remember the people lying inside the bunkers, with blank stares.

They did not even have the strength to get up from their beds. “Jews, you are liberated!” called out the American rabbi in Yiddish. The inmates gazed at him, incredulous, as if to ask, “Who is this crazy meshuggener standing here in uniform, screaming in Yiddish?”

At the Rebbe’s Tisch: 1950

After the war, Lulek makes his way to Eretz Yisrael and begins his schooling. Just after his Bar Mitzvah, he enters Kol Torah Yeshiva in Jerusalem. After his first Shabbat dinner there, his yeshivah schoolmates invite him to the tisch of the Rebbe of Gur. He has no idea what is in store for him—he finds the Chassidic customs and clothing strange. Even more puzzling, he discovers that the Rebbe recognizes him at once.

Then I understood the reason for the human wave flowing through the hall: the Rebbe had entered, hands clasped behind his back like a general. As soon as he walked in, the crowd parted like the Red Sea, allowing him to pass. As he walked by me, he looked at me, and his gaze was unique and unforgetable, riveting. In all my life, I merited only two such looks—one from the Rebbe of Gur, and the other twenty-four years later, from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Throughout those twenty-four years, I never met another person with a look as penetrating as that of the Rebbe of Gur. And there I was, this young boy in short pants with a beret on my head, standing out in this crowd of Chassidic men all wearing black silk robes with sashes and high fur hats. The Rebbe passed through the throng, his eyes surveying each individual, registering exactly who was present. In seconds, the order was transmitted to add me to the list. To my complete surprise, I heard
my name called out along with the others: “Srul Mayer, son of the rabbi of Piotrkow.” I did not respond. No one had ever called me Mayer. It had been five years since I had made aliya, and I had always been known as Yisrael or Israel Lau. Occasionally, some people called me Lulek, but “Srul Mayer”? This Yiddishism was completely foreign to my ears. I did not think they were referring to me, but the words “son of the rabbi of Piotrkow” echoed in my ears, and I told myself there could be no other. He couldn’t mean my brothers since Naphtali was working in Paris, and Shiko, my newly-found half-brother, was in Tel Aviv. Still, I did not dare make my way to the Rebbe’s table.

A few minutes later, Yehoshua Kleinlehrer, my friend from Kol Torah who had accompanied me to the tish, came up to me. His voice shaking, he said that in case I hadn’t heard, they had called my name. I shared my astonishment with him: Why were they calling my name? I had no answer, but he insisted that indeed, my name was the one they had called and I was the one they meant. He said I must go up to the Rebbe’s table. Embarrassed and confused, I asked him what I should do. Yehoshua explained the details calmly and clearly. “You see those steps where the gabbai is standing? Go up those three steps and look toward the table where the Rebbe is sitting. They’ll give you a small cup of wine in one hand and a slice of apple in the other. You say lechaim, directing yourself at the Rebbe, and the Rebbe will answer you, lechaim. It’s a very great honor. You’ve been chosen out of hundreds in this room.” As I listened to him, I felt weak in the knees. Of all the hundreds of people crowded into that suffocating room, I thought to myself, I know only three. So how is that I have been chosen, and I am the one who has been given this great honor that Kleinlehrer is describing? I realized I had no choice but to respond to the call.

As instructed, I went up the three steps. Someone gave me a wine cup and filled it halfway, and a slice of apple appeared in my other hand. Then the Rebbe in all his glory directed his penetrating gaze toward me. High fur hat perched on his head, surrounded left and right by his elderly disciples, he nodded his head up and down and toasted, “Lechaim.”

**Meeting the Rebbe**

The young yeshivah bochur is again taken to meet the Rebbe of Gur, this time for a short conversation.

The door opened and someone led me into the room. I saw the Rebbe pacing back and forth like a caged lion, his gaze fixed on the ground. In his left hand, he held a pinch of tobacco, which he occasionally brought to his nose and sniffed. With his right hand, he lifted his high velvet kippah and fanned his head, cooling himself from the late-summer heat. I stood by the door, but he did not even glance at me. I thought to myself that perhaps they had brought me in by mistake, and that he had not meant to invite me. As these thoughts raced through my head, the Rebbe stopped and stared at me and my outfit with his serious, penetrating gaze. He asked in Yiddish: “Who lent you those clothes?” “Simcha Eidelman,” I answered. He smiled warmly, then added, “I am used to seeing your brother Naphtali here more often than I see you. What is your uncle, Rabbi Vogelman, up to these days?” With one question, the Rebbe of Gur covered my entire world: Naphtali, my brother and protector, and Rabbi Vogelman, my uncle and foster father. This man to whom I had never spoken, who was responsible for tens of thousands of followers, knew exactly who the central individuals in my life were. I kept my answers concise and to the point, following the accepted conversational style of a Gur Chassid.

The Rebbe continued, “You were probably surprised to be called up at the tisch. I remember when your brother Naphtali came to visit my father, the Imrei Emet, five years ago. At the tisch, I passed through the rows in the hall and all of a sudden, I saw you. It was impossible not to notice you. You look very much like your brother Naphtali. I remember the name your father gave you at your circumcision ceremony in the Piotrkow synagogue. He said he was naming you Israel, after his rabbi, the rabbi of Chortakov, Rabbi Israel Friedeman, and also after his father-in-law from his first marriage, Rabbi Israel Hager, the rabbi of Vizhnitz, called the Ahvat Israel. Then he said he was also naming you Meir, after his cousin, Rabbi Meir Shapira of Lublin, who had no children. And, he added, he was naming you Israel Meir after the Chafetz Chaim, Rabbi Israel Meir of Radin. He had deep familial and spiritual ties with all four of those great men. The rabbi of Chortakov, the rabbi of Lublin and the Chafetz Chaim died within three months of each other, although the youngest was forty-six and the oldest ninety-four. As your father held you in his arms, he prayed to the Master of the Universe that a spark—I remember the exact word in Yiddish, a finek—from each of those souls would enter the soul of his child. I never forgot his words. When I saw you among the crowd on Shabbat eve, I realized that you were the brother of Naphtali...
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[that’s what the Rebbe called him, with a Yiddish accent], and I remembered your name, after all this time since your circumcision.” Again he transfixed me with his penetrating stare. Then he gave me an apple and said, “I hope to see you here more often.” I nodded, realizing that coming from him, such a pronouncement meant a serious obligation on my part.

**Israeli Chief Rabbi Meets Egyptian Chiefs: 1997**

As chief rabbi, Rabbi Lau represented the State of Israel in countless meetings with world leaders. In 1997, he traveled to Cairo to meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. At the president’s request, he also visited the grand mufti of Egypt, Dr. Mohammed Tantawi, also known as Sheik Al Azhar, Egypt’s most senior religious representative. In their discussion, the sheik challenged the status of Jerusalem and Rabbi Lau took up the gauntlet. This is only one example of how, as chief rabbi, Rabbi Lau used his role to defend the State of Israel as the Jewish homeland.

Then I asked, out of politeness, if he would be willing to pay me a visit in Jerusalem. I promised to receive him with the same degree of respect that he had shown us, but his answer was abrupt: “Only if my passport is stamped with the seal of a Palestinian state. I will not have my passport stamped with the seal of the State of Israel.”

But Sheik Al Azhar did not change his position. In his eyes, the Israelis had stolen Jerusalem from the Muslims. I could not allow such a state to go unchallenged. “I have done a little ‘homework’ on you,” I admitted. “I know you have a doctorate, and I was curious about the topic of your dissertation. I found out that you wrote about Jews and Judaism in the Koran. So I conclude that not only do you know Islam, but you know about Judaism as well. I also know something about Judaism, but I don’t know anything about Islam. So please permit me to ask, how many times does Jerusalem appear in the Koran? After all, we’re talking about the holy city, Al Kuds. Islam’s fundamental text must surely make mention of such a holy city,” I said. The sheik gave me a long, silent look. I continued to press my point: “In our Bible, the word ‘Jerusalem,’ and its synonym ‘Zion’ appear not just once or twice, but 821 times. This proves the centrality of Jerusalem in the Jewish faith and consciousness.

“So tell me,” I repeated my question. “How many times does the word Jerusalem appear in the Koran?” Again the sheik held his tongue. “I can make a guess,” I said, and he looked at me in silence. “Is the answer zero?” I asked. Zafzaf, his deputy, nodded his head. With that unforgettable affirmation, I left for the synagogue to recite the afternoon and evening services with the tiny Jewish community of Cairo. I had the feeling that despite Israel’s official peace with Egypt, we had a long way to go to achieve a stable and lasting peace, because some people, parties and movements still refused to accept the existence of the State of Israel as a fact.

After my return to Israel, Ariel Sharon told me that an Oman newspaper had published a political cartoon lampooning this meeting. It depicted two pigs, one wearing the Islamic crescent and the other, a Star of David. The caption underneath read: “Sheik Al Azhar meets with Hakham Akhbar [great sage] Lau.” The news reached Mubarak. In fury over this blow to the sheik’s honor, he issued a new law requiring citizens of Oman to apply for visas in order to visit Egypt.

**Our Response to the Holocaust**

Rabbi Lau often emphasizes that the “revenge” for the Holocaust is in the rebuilding of Jewish families and Jewish life. He himself sets an example.

My oldest son, Moshe Chaim, became a Bar Mitzvah on the Shabbat when we read the Biblical account of the Israelites’ battle with Amalek. I spoke about the last verse in the chapter: “The Lord maintains a war against Amalek, from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:16). We cannot fight the enemy Amalek, the nation or the phenomenon, with weapons or with ammunition. Rather, we are obligated to fight this battle in every generation, each generation passing on our heritage to the next. The struggle for the continuity of generations is the true battle and the great spiritual-Divine victory of Israel against the adversary Amalek. Our victory in the war against Amalek is that my son, Moshe Chaim Lau, is continuing the heritage of his grandfather, my father, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau, who went up to Heaven in a tempest.

Our son Moshe Chaim is the first candle in the private Chanukah menorah I have been privileged to create. My wife is the base of that menorah, from which the candles, our eight children, went out into the world. And I am the shamash, whose role is to help light those candles so that they will spread their light and proclaim, each in a special way, the miracle of the victory of eternal Israel.

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