

Faith in the Shadow of Death

By Judith Bleich

“We received you children as a deposit from Hashem. We do not know when we will be obligated to return our deposit, but...we will return you as Jews.”



That people lost their faith during the terrible years before, during, and in the aftermath of the Second World War comes as no surprise. Following the crash of the supersonic Concorde in Paris in the summer of 2000 and the death of a large group of German tourists, Bishop Josef Homeyer asked, “God, where were you in Paris?”¹ When millions of Jews and members of other ethnic groups perished, victims of an inhuman and brutal Nazi regime, it is surely understandable that, confronted by the inexplicable catastrophe, many individuals found themselves plagued by religious doubt and theological bewilderment. What is, in a sense, more astonishing is the unshakable belief and rock-fast loyalty to Torah and *mitzvot* of those staunch and stalwart Jews who clung unwaveringly to their traditions and in whose hearts burned such love for God and Torah, that from the bunkers of the death camps their voices swelled in the words of *Ani Maamin* expressing the defiant conviction of every one of them that redemption was inevitable, and “even though [the redeemer] may tarry, nevertheless, each day I await his coming.”

In introductory comments to *Shir HaShirim*, Rav Kook points out that literature mirrors human experience and imagination, whether it be bestial and foul or gracious and sublime.²

Haunting and harrowing testimonies, such as Paul Steinberg’s current *Speak You Also: A Survivor’s Reckoning*, plumb the depths of degradation that led to “The death of feeling, the death of thought, then the death of the man.”³ But few are the works that reveal the reverse, the flickering flame of the soul that will not permit itself to be extinguished and the love that cannot be quenched.

Yesupar LaDor (1994), Yona Emanuel’s memoir of his family’s wartime experiences, translated into English under the title *Dignity to Survive* (Jerusalem: Targum/Feldheim, 1998), differs from most heretofore published Holocaust narratives by virtue of its unique perspective as pinpointed in the subtitle, *One Family’s Story of Faith in the Holocaust*.

The work recounts the experiences of the Emanuel family, two parents and eight children, who fell into Nazi hands upon the German invasion of Holland, from deportation to a transit camp in Westerbork to detention in Bergen-Belsen and the loss of both parents and four of the eight children. The engrossing narrative is based upon the transcribed personal memories of the author supplemented by reminiscences authored by his brother Shmuel and a brief contribution by a sister Bella as well as the family’s correspondence with grandparents who lived in Switzerland and who saved every letter they received, many of which bore the seal of the German censor.

The account is extraordinary not simply in its compelling depiction of the horrors of the camps but because of its portrayal of a singular family. The Emanuel home was permeated with a deep-seated faith grounded in

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profound intellectual understanding. Rigorous Torah scholarship, meticulous devotion to *mitzvot* and boundless love of fellow Jews combined to create an atmosphere that, the author writes, “can best be described as a continuous state of readiness to serve Hashem and to perform deeds of loving-kindness at any time and under all circumstances” (p. 16). If that statement appears to be hyperbolic or a reflection of nostalgic mythologizing, it is to Yona Emanuel’s abiding credit that no one who reads this book will dispute its veracity.

A *talmid chacham* of renown, an optician by profession and a scholar, writer and editor by avocation, Emanuel provides the reader fresh lenses with which to focus sharply and clearly on a segment of our society rarely portrayed: the unassuming, deeply pious Jews of a Germany and Holland that no longer exist. Those individuals embodied the *Torah im derech erez* ideal and were part of what Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe terms the “glorious community of the past,” one whose “noble tradition which has essentially become extinct” is little known or appreciated.⁴ In Yona Emanuel this community has found a worthy chronicler.

Recent publications focusing on the Holocaust authored by individuals associated with fervently Orthodox, Chassidic or yeshivah circles have elicited speculation regarding earlier avoidance of this topic in those quarters. A number of specious explanatory theories have been advanced. According to one view there is lingering embarrassment among the Orthodox for their failure to act aggressively in rescuing people trapped in Nazi-occupied territory.⁵ This is not only a faulty theory but also a canard. Orthodox rescue organizations as well as Orthodox rabbis and communal leaders were human, and hence fallible, and may have made errors of judgment. Who did not?

But, in terms of efforts to save lives, the Orthodox communities of Europe, the United States and *Eretz Yisrael* were united in espousing a policy of activism and contributed to rescue efforts in a proportion far greater than their numbers, economic status or political influence.

Probably the most compelling explanation for the reversal of attitude from silence to outspokenness is to be found in the phenomenon of the march of time, of the normal human lifespan and the quite understandable mind set of individuals entering the final phases of mortal existence. Immediately following the cataclysm of war — as is the case following any catastrophe or calamity, or indeed any major trauma, including divorce, dislocation or death of loved ones — the victims are numbed by pain and seek solace in oblivion that can be attained only by distancing themselves from the hurtful events. Only with the palliative passage of time does it again become possible for those individuals to confront what has occurred.

For some, the trauma of the Nazi years remains so palpable that even now, close to 60 years later, viewing a film or reading a book dealing with the Holocaust leaves them in a state of turmoil. For others, as time has passed, a new emotional response comes to the fore, an intense desire to leave a memorial, to bear witness, to achieve some form of closure. And so, for those individuals, natural reticence is overcome and gives way to an almost frenetic effort to speak of the unspeakable in order to generate a permanent record.

It is in this spirit that Yona Emanuel tells of his decision to set down in words an account of his wartime life for the benefit of children’s children. It is, he writes, with an eye to future generations that he conquered his inhibitions, broke what among survivors had become a code of silence and resurrected the pain-drenched past

in order to transmit to posterity a sense of the saintliness of those who, living in “conditions much worse than anyone who has not experienced them can possibly imagine” (p. 308), sanctified the Name of God in death and in life.

A number of illustrations may serve to convey the tenor of Emanuel’s contribution and afford a glimpse of the devoutness he strives to portray.

A complicated question arises in formulating the halachic perspective regarding ownership of religious books or ritual artifacts seized by the Nazis that subsequently fell into the hands of Jews who were not the original owners. One of the important considerations in determining the *halachah* is the issue of whether or not the victim of the theft has experienced *ye’ush*, i.e., whether the original owner has despaired of recovery. Title to stolen property is vested in a subsequent purchaser only pursuant to *ye’ush* on the part of the victim of the theft. There has been some controversy among rabbinic scholars as to whether *ye’ush* was in fact experienced by Jewish victims of Nazi brutality. Thus, the late Rabbi Isaac Liebes dwelled upon the diabolical Nazi plan to eradicate all vestiges of Jewish life and wrote of the hapless victims:

*In such a state, if they already despaired of their lives, did they not most certainly [despair] of their property? To whom would it occur to think thoughts of his house or fortune while under the nails of the angel of death, the impure foul oppressor, in the death camps and in the ghettos?*⁶

These strong sentiments notwithstanding, it has been argued by other scholars that, on the contrary, Jewish victims clung to their faith in the Divine Covenant with Israel and their resolute conviction that Jews who cherish sacred books would always exist and that those Jews would seek to recover the volumes that were rightfully theirs. Hence, even in the darkest

hours and in the valley of the shadow of death, their faith precluded them from succumbing to despair or *ye'ush* with regard to what the future would bring in its wake.⁷

Emanuel's account of the fate of his family's *sefarim* sheds light on this intriguing halachic debate. The members of the Emanuel family were bibliophiles. Apart from the awe with which they regarded their father's extensive collection, the children lovingly kept track of the circumstances in which their own books were received, whether as gifts or otherwise, of the personal inscriptions on the fly-leafs of the books and of the occasions on which they had made use of them in their studies. When the fateful day dawned and they were forced to leave their place of refuge in Utrecht, one of their primary concerns was the fate of their treasured library. At the time, they resided in temporary quarters in an apartment on the top floor of a multi-storied building. Under the floorboards in one of the bedrooms was a hollow about 40 centimeters high that ran along the length and breadth of the room. Painstakingly, they removed the floorboards and concealed the *sefarim* in this hollow. Earlier, during the dead of night, they had assisted in transporting hundreds of volumes from the home of Chief Rabbi Tal to a hiding place in the home of a gentile, but they were afraid to repeat such a risky undertaking. The author describes the somber mood that prevailed among the family members as they spirited away their precious books, wondering all the while whether they would remain among the living and whether they would merit again to study from those pages. Emanuel poignantly records the unspoken agreement that whoever would survive would return to retrieve the sacred books.

It was the author's brother Shmuel who, after his release from Bergen-Belsen and convalescence in Nymegen, returned to the family's former abode

in Utrecht, tore up the floorboards and began to carry the *sefarim* down the three flights of stairs. But, in his eagerness to recover the books, Shmuel had overestimated his strength. He took ill and was bedridden for several months before he was able to return to the task of rescuing the library. Emanuel's account of this episode graphically illustrates the attitude of *yirei Shamayim* [the pious] to *tash-mishei kedushah* [religious articles] and how their spiritual fortitude prevented them from succumbing to *ye'ush*.

Instructive also are the comments Emanuel records regarding *tefillin*. In a letter dated August 1942, his mother expressed her consternation at learning that when Jews were deported by the Nazis they were forced to leave religious articles behind: "Can you imagine Elchanan, Shlomo, Yona, Shmuel and Baruch without their *tefillin*?" (p. 96). The author writes that, in this instance, his mother's heartfelt prayers were answered. Their *tefillin* were the *only* objects that her surviving sons were able to preserve during their incarceration and bring back with them from the camps.

Upon liberation, Yona Emanuel and his sister Bella found themselves near the village of Troebits in southeast Germany. They suffered from typhus and diarrhea and were incapable of retaining food. Gravely ill, Yona was taken to a field hospital where he was cleaned and shaved by a German barber who, after throwing his filthy clothing into a corner, wrested from him the *tefillin* he was holding and cast them upon the pile of dirty laundry. Emanuel was devastated, but too overpoweringly weak to protest. But then, in an amazing development, a Russian nurse clad in army fatigues returned the *tefillin* to him and sequestered them under his bed covers.

Among Emanuel's informative accounts of the manner in which *mitzvot* were observed under dire conditions is his report of the *Yehi Ratzon* ("May it be Your will") prayer prisoners in the camps composed and recited

prior to eating *chametz* on Passover. His descriptions of the manner in which observant Jews meticulously endeavored to avoid biblically forbidden acts on the Sabbath are captivating. Compelled upon pain of death to perform slave labor on the Sabbath, they found ways and means to reduce the severity of the infraction by turning biblically proscribed acts into acts forbidden by rabbinic edict. A further dimension is added by the inclusion of novellae and insights into Torah passages that suggested themselves to the author in the course of his wartime experiences.

One of the most moving narratives in the book concerns the author's mother and provides a striking illustration of the utter piety of the Emanuels. On Friday night of Shabbat Nachamu, 1944, Chana Emanuel was subjected to a trial by members of the *Judenrat* in Bergen-Belsen for the offense of breaking camp rules by cooking a portion of porridge for her youngest child. She had prepared the food for her daughter on a day on which camp inmates were being collectively punished and no food had been provided. The trial was conducted entirely by Jews who served as prosecuting and defense attorneys, judges and court clerks. Contrary to the norm, Chana Emanuel's trial was exceedingly brief. She waived her right to present a defense and accepted the verdict of forfeiture of her bread ration for a number of days. When later asked why she had made no attempt to defend herself or to plead mitigating circumstances, Chana Emanuel replied that the clerk recording the minutes of the trial was Jewish. Had she spoken, he would have proceeded to transcribe every word she uttered. Accordingly, she resolved to remain silent and accept further privation, rather than cause additional desecration of the Sabbath on the part of a fellow Jew.

Later in the book, the author writes that his beloved mother passed away on a Friday night on the train transporting survivors from Bergen-Belsen.

When her body was removed from the compartment he sought to follow in order to accord his mother some form of burial, but as a result of his own feebleness and exhaustion, he collapsed and was unable to reach her. Movingly, he adds that years thereafter his sainted teacher, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, *zt"l*, told him that, although preservation of life takes precedence over Torah law, if there is a choice between leaving a corpse without proper burial or desecrating the Sabbath, Sabbath observance take precedence over burial. It is his conviction, the author comments, that he was prevented from burying his mother as he had wished, and that, in death, his mother was spared from benefiting from desecration of the Sabbath, in the merit of her self-sacrifice in remaining silent at the Bergen-Belsen trial.

The youngest Emanuel child, Bitya, was barely three years old in 1942, when the extermination of Dutch Jewry began. As the danger escalated, her parents placed Bitya with a childless non-Jewish couple in the countryside. One day, Bitya and the woman caring for her visited the Emanuels. When the assembled family members recited the Grace After Meals, Bitya's caretaker whispered a prayer while making the sign of the cross and Bitya followed her example. Bitya's parents refused to send the child back into hiding in a non-Jewish home. They informed the older children: "We received you children as a deposit from Hashem. We do not know when we will be obligated to return our deposit, but...we will return you as Jews" (p. 126). At the age of five years and four months, Bitya died of starvation in Bergen-Belsen and returned her soul to God. It was for preparing food for Bitya that Mrs. Emanuel was subjected to the earlier described trial.

The descriptions of the deaths in short succession of the author's father, his youngest sister and brother, and later of his oldest brother and mother and, finally, of another brother are searingly painful. When Yona tried to

comfort his mother after the passing of the youngest siblings by recounting the talmudic narrative of the words of Bruriah to Rabbi Meir upon the death of their sons, his mother responded, "You are right, my son, Bruriah did lose her sons, but she still had her husband to comfort and support her." Thereafter, when the eldest brother, the scholarly and brilliant Elchanan, the family's pride and joy, succumbed, the author tells us that for a time his mother experienced difficulty in praying. One is humbled to read of her ability to master her emotions and tell a confidant, "Thank God, I am able to pray again!" (p. 231).

This book is admittedly very difficult to read. Again and again one must put it down because tears make it impossible to read further. But read further one must. For, in the end, this is an inspiring work that celebrates the indomitable human spirit and demonstrates *mah yafah yerushatenu*, the beauty of our heritage, and *mi ke'amcha Yisrael, goy echad ba'aretz*, that the people of Israel are unique.

Educators are engaged in ongoing attempts to develop curricular materials that convey ethical and spiritual lessons and to commission textbooks for use in yeshivah high schools. *Yesupar LaDor* is eminently suited to their needs. Emanuel's stirring book should be required reading — in English where appropriate, but far better in the Hebrew original,⁸ for qualified high school or seminary students. The material constitutes an invaluable pedagogical tool for a range of disciplines: *musar*, history, Hebrew literature, *halachah* and *hashkafah*. In sum, we have been handed a rare gem. It behooves us to take advantage of each of its brilliant facets.

Virtually every adolescent recognizes the name Anne Frank and knows of her diary. It is the sincere hope of this reviewer that every student in our educational system will come to recognize the name of the Emanuel family and become familiar with Yona Emanuel's exceptional memoir. **JA**

Notes

1. Roger Cohen, "Germans Led by Schroder in Mourning their Dead," *New York Times*, July 27, 2000, p. A6.
2. *Olat Reiyah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1962), II, 3.
3. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000, p.62.
4. Translation of Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's Letter of Approbation, unnumbered pages, p.7, published as a preface to *Dignity to Survive*. See also Dr. Mordechai Breuer, Foreword, *ibid.*, p. 11. Cf. the remarks of Rabbi Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg, *Seridei Esh*, vol. II (Jerusalem, 1962), no. 30, p. 53, note, regarding the pious rabbis of Germany whose character and attainments remain uncelebrated as well as his comment in a personal communication, dated 1964, cited in "Sarid ha-Esh," *Ha-Ma'ayan*, vol. VI, no 3 (Nisan, 1966), p. 66: "If my health permits, I will...publish articles on German Jewry. To my distress it has no successor in other countries, not even in *Eretz Yisra'el*. . ."
5. See, for example Deborah Sontag, "More Than One Way to Remember the Holocaust," *New York Times*, May 3, 2000, p. A4, and Netty C. Gross, "Why Did God Do This to Us?" *The Jerusalem Report*, May 8, 2000, pp. 18-21, especially p. 21.
6. See Rabbi Isaac Liebes, *Teshuvot Bet Avi*, (New York, 1970), I, no. 157.
7. See, for example, Rabbi Weinberg, *Seridei Esh*, III (Jerusalem, 1966), no. 11, who states emphatically that the Jewish victims never abandoned hope that the enemy would be vanquished.
8. It is noteworthy that, quite apart from this work, Yona Emanuel enjoys an enviable reputation as the judicious and very able editor of the noted Israeli rabbinic journal *Ha-Ma'ayan*, which he has shepherded for decades, as well as for his own erudite essays characterized by keen scholarship and stylistic elegance. It is therefore regrettable that the English translation of this chronicle, while it represents a faithful and earnest effort and is readable, is lacking in idiomatic expression and felicity of language. [Note even the title, "*Dignity to Survive*."] The English version, which is somewhat stilted and awkward, does not do justice to the quality of the original.