

# SURVIVAL OF THE SPIRITUALLY FITTEST

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

However, if you will not listen to Me, and do all of these commandments... (Vayikra 26:14)

NUMBERS ARE JUST numbers, except when tattooed on the arm of an old Jew. The sleeves of his designer shirt were rolled up, just enough to reveal most of the number. He was faded, but the numbers, not so much.

Life around us was bustling as we sat outside at a little table at a small cafe of his choosing. People came and went in all directions, completely oblivious to the past, to HIS past. But one look at those numbers on his withered arm had a reverse effect on me. They seemed to make everything ELSE disappear and seem so TRIVIAL.

It had taken me months to get Mr. Bernstein to meet with me. I kept calling and he kept saying "No." Then he stopped taking my phone calls, so I stopped making them. Imagine the surprise when I got a call one day asking ME to meet him. What had changed his mind?

Though he had said he did not want anything, I took the liberty of ordering two coffees and danishes. Worse come to worst, I would take them home for my kids. But his frail body looked so weak, and his eyes seemed so empty that I felt compelled to fill the table to balance the scene.

It was like a shiva call at first. I didn't know how to start, so I just waited for him. He looked at the danishes for a couple of moments, and then to my further surprise, he picked one up. Then he slowly maneuvered his hand to his shirt pocket, and painstakingly pulled some material out. I had NO idea at first what it was, but as he took it out, it opened up into one of those cheap shul yarmulkes.

"That's strange," I thought to myself. "He doesn't seem religious..."

After making sure the kippah was resting securely on his head, he turned his attention back to the danish in his other hand. Looking at it, he made a blessing, slowly, deliberately, as if he really meant it, and then took a bite.

He chewed a small piece of danish for what seemed like a very long time. But as he did, I reminded myself of who he was and where he had come from. I then acted like nothing else mattered for the rest of the day, and it was only late morning.

"You still make blessings?" I asked him.

He looked up at me with a skewered face, which then softened. It seemed as if he did not understand my question at first, and then did.

"Mr. Rosenthal, right?" he asked.

"Call me Jim..." I told him.

"Okay. Jim," he said, putting his small bitten danish back on its plate. "They call us 'holy disbelievers'...because of what we went through...because of the horrors we had to endure. Our faith in God was shaken to its core...friends of mine who came from the most religious families gave it all up because of what happened to them...to their families..."

He paused, and his eyes teared. Had his body not been so dried, especially from all the crying he had to do during the worst of it, I imagine he would have poured tears. Instead, he just looked up, and out, where I did not know.

"The holy part," he said once he rejoined me, "was because we were excused for our doubts because of all we had..."

He could not finish his sentence and just looked down. I wanted to cry.

We had lost family in the Shoah as well, but no one I had been familiar with. The Holocaust had not really touched my family. Some names had been mentioned over the years, and I could see the sadness in my parents' faces. But it was nothing that really caught my attention or made me think.

It wasn't until High School that it caught my interest. It was a gentile school, and the Holocaust only got a brief mention during one history class. When I asked, in class, how the brutal death of 6,000,000 Jews could be discussed so briefly, I was told that being a very sensitive and controversial topic, the curriculum demanded that only the smallest amount of time be devoted to it.

I understood that on one level. But something inside me also felt as if a grave injustice was being committed, and over time, it got to me. I wasn't even sure why I was SO affected, but eventually, I found myself devoting more and more time to increasing Holocaust awareness. It became my life's work, and it brought me to people like Mr. Bernstein, through whom I had developed my OWN Holocaust sensitivity.

"Are you back?" he asked me.

At first, I didn't know what he meant, then I realized that I had been the one to drift off this time. In a strange way, it made us more alike, and I could see it in his somewhat hollow eyes.

"Yes, I'm back."

"Good," he said. "If both of us drift off, we'll be here forever and never say anything."

I smiled and was delighted that someone like that could still make jokes...

"Why did you change your mind and call me?" I asked, already moving on from the previous discussion.

"You asked me why I still make a brochah...meaning after ALL God DID to me..."

That was what I meant, but it sounded rather coarse being fed back to me by him.

"I still believe in God," he said, choking up as he did. That wasn't an easy statement for him to make.

"I still believe He takes care of everyone and feeds us," he continued. "I still have to ask His permission to eat, and thank him for what I have..."

He stopped to think, and then said. "I don't know why He did all that to us...or at least allowed it to happen...and maybe one day I will...or maybe one day I won't...but I STILL believe in Him." His voice trailed off.

He slowly took another bite of his danish, then making a blessing over his coffee, he sipped with a sound, a little loudly. He was old, and tortured, and was allowed to make as much noise as he needed to.

A few minutes passed and I began to wonder if I would ever know the reason for our meeting. But it didn't really matter. I had learned over the years that just being in the presence of such people was a special thing, and I had learned to cherish every moment of every opportunity. Even disbelievers seemed to have a special relationship to God that others who had not gone through the camps could EVER have.

"I decided to meet with you," he finally said, "because I am 95 years old, and if I don't come clean NOW, when will I?"

"Okay," I thought, amused by his rather "hip" language. "Come clean? Of what? It was the world who owed HIM a living, not the other way around. What could he have possibly done 'wrong,' that his conscience had been looking for a way out?"

"Come clean?" I asked him. "What could a nice, elderly, respectable gentleman like you, who had been forced to endure the unimaginable possibly have to come clean of?"

My question didn't seem to make it any easier for him. Instead, he looked away, off in the distance...no...he was looking back in time, and his eyes watered as he did. I just waited.

"I...was...20...years...old," he began, struggling to pull each word out from the depths of the darkest nightmares. "I had already been in the camp for a year and a half. Bergen Belsen..."

I watched his old and worn face change shapes various times as he spoke, and I realized that he wasn't just recounting a terrible period of his life. He was reliving it. Born 25 years AFTER the war ended, it was bravery I did not know.

"Tommy..." he started to say, and it threw me off. I just assumed he was talking about someone Jewish, and which Jewish boy at that time had the name "Tommy"?

"His name was Tommy?"

He stopped in his tracks, and looked at me, scrutinized me. Then he said, "No. His name was not Tommy. It was Yankele. He was born Yankele Berdolvitz. But when those animals MURDERED his ENTIRE family in front of his eyes...and he saw the other horrors of the world around him...he stopped calling himself 'Yankele'. He was angry at God, VERY angry at God...we ALL were...so he took a gentile name..."

I nodded slowly to indicate that I understood, not just what he was saying now, but what it was that made a good Jewish boy do such an unJewish thing. Holy disbelievers...

"Tommy and I were around the same age," he continued, "and we became friends. Sometimes we just helped each other cope physically, but a lot of the time we argued..."

"Argued?" I ask. Who had strength in the camps to argue?

"Yes, argued...mostly about whether or not God existed. He said that no God could ever let this horror happen to His people. He said that if God actually existed, and He COULD let such torturous genocide happen, then he wanted no part of Him..."

"Hmm," I said sympathetically, trying to put myself in "Tommy's" frame of mind. I couldn't even come CLOSE, and I criticized myself for even trying. The Holocaust belonged to another realm of consciousness into which I had never entered, and hopefully, never will have to.

"I told him," he continued, "that everything we were going through was in the Torah, first in Parashas Bechukosai, and then later in Ki Savo. Year after year we had LEARNED about the curses for straying from God and Torah. We didn't listen. We didn't take them seriously. Now we were LIVING them."

"He didn't agree. He said that devout Jews, like his parents and the rest of his family, were ruthlessly killed. They tried so hard, in spite of all the obstacles, to KEEP the Torah. Yet, he said, God murdered them...in cold blood...cruelly... before his eyes..."

"So I told him, we don't know God that well, or how He works. I told him the story about Rebi Akiva and how the great Moshe Rabbeinu, and even the angels had problems with it..."

I knew the story. I had read it in a book about the Holocaust. The author made a similar point, or at least TRIED to. It seemed more like apologetics, and the book left me feeling as if we're better off saying, "We don't KNOW why God does what He does, and why the Holocaust was SO...SO..."

"Horrible," he said to me, and for a moment I thought he had read my mind and finished my sentence. He was actually starting his own.

"It was just horrible to watch a nice Jewish boy who had believed in God, and who would have

probably stayed religious all of his life, had it not been for..."

The word did not leave his mouth. It got caught in his throat, so I spared him the trouble.

"He was like so many," I said. "and I'm sure he has a special place by God."

He forced a slight smile.

"Only God can judge a person. Only God knows what a person is capable of. He may have given up on God, but I'm sure God never gave up on him..."

"I'd like to think so," he told me.

Then his face became VERY serious.

"He died in a gas chamber," he intoned. "I watched him go in...I saw him give me one last smile before he did...a smile that said, 'I told you so!'...and then he was gone...forever..."

He paused and looked out into the distance again...the distant past...perhaps back at his friend re-walking into the gas chamber. I just looked down, and gave him all the time he needed to continue.

"That's when I looked up..." he said.

Up? To Heaven?

"That's when I noticed it," he continued, now looking me dead in the eyes. "Those barbarians weren't happy just killing us off," he said, pent up anger visible in even HIS old eyes. "They had to mock us too! They had taken the paroches off some Aharon HaKodesh and placed it over the door of the chamber. I could see the writing on it...it said...'This is the gate of God, through which the righteous go'."

His face reddened, and I actually worried that he might have a heart attack. Instead, he WENT on the attack, and I now worried that I would have the heart attack!

"I became enraged!" he said, enraged. "I was so angry that part of me just wanted to attack every Nazi I could, and maim or kill them! I didn't care if I died trying. I just wanted to avenge my people...my friend."

"But I didn't," he said, feeling what seemed like some shame. "I barely had the strength to walk! Instead, I just fell to my knees as the last of the 'selected' entered the death chambers, and the executioners locked the door. Soon I would be called on to..."

It was too difficult for him to finish the thought, and I could figure out why. I was becoming more uneasy by the moment, as if I was being dragged through the nightmare with him

"All I could do was cry. Well, at least I tried. There wasn't enough liquid in my body to make tears...but I went through the motions. And as I did, I found myself getting weaker...and weaker... Not

just physically, but mentally. My resistance had been worn down, partly because my friend was gone, and there was no one left to challenge me...except me."

"That's when the doubt began to creep in..." he said, reflecting. "No not creep in, because I realized later that it had ALWAYS been there. It just began to surface at that time."

"I tried to fight it at first," he said, agitated, "but it kept coming back each day...each HOPELESS day. I had run out of answers...and the doubt began to fill the void. Maybe Tommy had more of an impact on me than I had thought..."

He reflected some more, and then continued.

"The turning point, if you can call it that..." he said mournfully, "was the day I saw a couple of nine-year-olds get beaten to death. They had stolen a small piece of bread...and those butchers..."

He talked with clenched teeth, still feeling the anger...

"...caught them, and beat them...and beat them...and beat them...in plain sight...LONG past their last breaths of a miserable life had left them..."

"That is when," he said, a sense of guilt visible, "I finally turned my back on Him..."

"Him...God?" I knew that is what he meant, but I just wanted to confirm it.

"Yes."

"I can understand why," I told him, so he wouldn't feel I was judging him at all. I gave him some time to regain some strength. I felt bad that I had forced him to drain himself, but he had called me to meet. It seems he had wanted this, though I still was not sure why.

"Is this what you wanted to share with me?" I asked, softly, understandingly.

"Partially," he answered. "It's the other part that I want you to know...to share..."

"And what is that?"

He summoned more strength, as if preparing himself to finish a mission, an IMPORTANT mission.

"Nine months after Tommy's death...Yankele's death..."

I assumed that he had gone back to Tommy's original name as part of his OWN healing, and didn't ask. In fact, I decided not to interrupt him again.

"...we were liberated. The war ended, and I went the route of most survivors...Displaced Persons camps...fruitless search for surviving relatives...eventually ending up in New York. I had an uncle there, and he took me in. He was a good man...doing everything he could to make me feel like one of his own. But sometimes that only made it worse, not better."

"Then came the nightmares...the constant nightmares...for years after...thousands of miles away, but still in my memory like it all just happened yesterday."

"How many times I must have watched Yankele walk through that door to death...over and over again... How many times I woke up shivering, crying, distraught for hours..."

I found myself crying for him, on the inside and on the outside. I had an intense desire to hug him, stranger as he was to me. It was not easy to maintain my OWN composure. I just kept thinking how lucky I was to have been born AFTER it all had occurred, that I had been spared...

"As time went on, the nightmares became less frequent," he explained, "but they never fully went away. Eventually I married, and we had our own children. But I found myself always worried that someone would come along and tear them away from me, as I, and so many others, had been torn away from our families...It was so hard to enjoy anything again!"

"I can't imagine," I told him.

"No, you can't," he said. "And you should never HAVE to! No one should EVER have to go through any of that again."

"Amen..." I found myself saying.

"Anyhow," he continued, "about 15 years ago, something happened to change my life...again."

"And what was that?"

"I dreamed of Yankele..."

"A DREAM, or a NIGHTMARE?"

"A dream," he said. "It was really strange, because this time Yankele actually spoke to me..." He seemed to catch himself and explain, "Well, at least he spoke to me in the DREAM...I'm not saying he actually CAME to me in the dream and spoke to me...and I don't know if the dream had any REAL significance..."

"What did he say..." I asked, and then correcting myself, I added, "in the DREAM, of course."

He paused for a good long moment, and it looked as if he was unsure whether he should tell me what I wanted to know. But he had to now.

"He told me that it was God Who had arranged for the paroches to be put over the door to the gas chamber. The Nazis had done it to make fun of the Jews, but God had arranged it for another reason. It was to tell all the Jews who passed through it that God considered each of them like a Sefer Torah being returned to the Aron HaKodesh. He told me that there was a Divine reason for everything that happened...that he had been wrong about God...that I had been RIGHT about Him...but he could not say more at that time. He begged me...literally pleaded with me...to do teshuvah while I was still

alive..."

I waited for more, and when it didn't come, I asked, "Well?"

"Well?" he repeated, sitting back and taking a deep breath. "I was an 80-year old man at the time...God had not been a part of my life for 60 years, as hard as my family tried to change that. Was I supposed to all of a sudden pick up where I had left off back in that death camp?"

I didn't answer the question, not to him and not to myself. I didn't even know what it was.

"I never saw Yankele again, not in a dream and not in a nightmare. But the dream would not fade, and it became increasingly annoying until..."

"Until?" my expression said.

"...until I found an old Chumash on a bookshelf that I hadn't even known was there. Apparently, it was a Bar Mitzvah present for one of my grandsons, and he had left it in our home."

"I wanted to put it back on the shelf, or just get rid of it...but couldn't. For reasons I could not explain, I wound up on the sofa and just stared at it for what must have been about 20 minutes..."

I could guess what was coming next, but I wanted to hear it from him.

"I don't know why," he said, "to this very day I cannot figure out what made me do it, but I randomly opened it...to"

"No," I thought to myself. "Not to..."

"Parashas Bechukosai..."

He choked up. I choked up.

"I started to cry," he said. "A little at first, and then more, and then more, and then...I fell onto the floor and rolled myself up like a baby...and cried like one too. I cried for my father, and for my mother, and my three sisters and two brothers...I cried for my neighbors and my town...and for ANYONE and EVERYONE I could think of..."

"Wow..." was all I could say, holding back my own tears. "I am NOT going to cry like a baby in public!" I told myself, but wasn't sure of my resolve.

"And then I cried...for...God," he said almost too softly to hear.

"You cried for God?" I was surprised.

"Yes. I even found myself crying for God...ESPECIALLY for God."

"Why?"

"I also did not know at first," he said. "But then I realized...as a father...that as much as we hurt from



what happened, God hurt more."

I looked at him in the eyes, requesting additional explanation.

"My father, may his soul rest in peace, always told me, since I was a little boy, that God was our FATHER. A father LOVES his children and will do anything for them, especially if it is for their own good. And sometimes that means," my father taught me, "being hard on them...for their own good."

"But, my father told me, I had to always know that, as angry and hurtful as a father may seem to be, he really loves his children, and it hurts him even more to have to punish them, and make them sad..."

He looked down and considered his own words, clearly believing them. Then he slowly reached for his pocket, a different pocket this time, and he pulled out a different yarmulke, a black felt one.

"So, Jim..." he said, putting the kippah on his head.

"Ya'akov," I said. I felt compelled, after all that, to use my Hebrew name too.

"Okay, Ya'akov. Well, Ya'akov," he began again, "I called you to meet me because this is the day I finally told my story...it is my moment of reconciliation. I could not put on a yarmulke again until I did. It just didn't feel right. I still have lots of questions to ask God, but I now accept that answers might not come until much later on. But I am very old now, and before I go and meet my Father in Heaven, I figure I ought to dress 'appropriately'..."

I smiled. This man impressed me. For so many reasons, he impressed me.

The conversation turned to lighter topics for the last 15 minutes. Not only did he give me permission to publish our interview, but he insisted on it. He called it a way to make amends for his mistakes of the past.

As we got up to leave, I gave him a hug. I rarely ever did that to a "stranger," even to friends. I told him that he was an exception, that he had EARNED it. He seemed to appreciate that.

I promised to call him soon, but never got the chance. He died three weeks later, and I made a point of attending his funeral. It was disappointingly small, at least as far as I was concerned. But, he had outlived most of his friends and family, and was a survivor through-and-through.

As I drove away, I went through our time together in my mind. All of it was memorable, but the most memorable part of all was what he said, just before he turned away to go. He told me, "Mr. Rosenthal, if you remember anything at all in life, remember this: God loves you, always, no matter what it seems like to you."

I smiled and felt warm all over. Apparently, I had needed to hear that too.

"I now know that," I told him, "after seeing how much He loves YOU."

He smiled so deeply I melted. Then we both went our separate ways, him to God apparently, and

me to find my way to Him.