



## **Out Of The Depths: The Story Of A Child Of Buchenwald Who Returned Home At Last**

by Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau

with Forewords by Shimon Peres and Elie Weisel

In his recent book, Rabbi Israel Meir Lau tells the miraculous story of his rescue from the Holocaust as a young child, and his subsequent aliyah to the land of Israel. Arriving as an eight-year-old orphan refugee in Palestine in 1945, without any parents, and virtually no formal schooling, Rabbi Lau eventually attains the position of Chief Rabbi of Israel. Through his eyes and his own moving story, we also learn about the major events that shaped Israel since the founding of the state in 1948.

The March of the Living figures prominently in the book. As one of Israel's youngest Holocaust survivors and most outspoken Orthodox Zionist leaders, Rabbi Lau is convinced of the value of the March of the Living with regard to strengthening one's commitment to Zionism and Jewish identity.

**In his words, "From my experience and observation, the Jews who come from other countries around the world to participate in the March of the Living return from it with a deeper commitment to Israel, while the Israelis go home more conscious of their Jewish identity."**

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To read excerpts from the book about the March of the Living and other parts of his heroic story, see below:

***Pages 356 to 360 - Rabbi Lau discusses his participation in the March of the Living and the impact the program continues to have on young people in Israel and around the world.***

In 1988, Abraham Hirschson of the General Federation of Labor (Histadrut) and Dr. Shmuel Rosenman, a former student of mine from moshav Chemed, asked me to lead the first March of the Living. Participants in the march walk the 1.8 miles (three kilometers) from Auschwitz to Birkenau, and then stand near the bombed-out barracks, where a memorial ceremony for the Holocaust martyrs is held. The goal is to demonstrate to ourselves and the entire world what is written in "Zog Nit Keynmol," or the partisans' anthem: "Beneath our tread the earth shall tremble - we are here!" This is not a declaration of a desire to live in Poland but rather a statement to emphasize our Jewish stubbornness, perseverance and power of survival in that very location. Precisely in that place, we must demonstrate that Am Yisrael Chai - the Jewish nation lives - and it has a future.

Of course, I agreed to Hirschson's request. Seven hundred youngsters from Israel and the Diaspora participated, along with a delegation of adults. Among those representing Israel were minister of education and culture Yizchak Navon and Knesset members who were also Holocaust survivors. Writer Elie Wiesel came from New York, together with the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations at the time, Benjamin Netanyahu.

We planned to hold the memorial ceremony in the crematorium area, accompanied by speeches and torch-lighting. Cantor Benjamin Muller of Antwerp, who has a remarkable voice would conduct the ceremony and chant El Maleh Rachamim, the memorial prayer. But at the last minute, I felt we needed something else. Someone suggested that we add a musical piece, and all agreed, but we had no idea who would be available to play at such short notice.

A feverish search soon bore fruit. The night before the ceremony, someone brought to my room a Warsaw youth of about fifteen, a talented violinist. Some suggested he might be of Jewish ancestry. We asked him to play something appropriate for Jews. He put his bow to the strings, but none of the melodies he played was appropriate.

We had almost given up hope when I asked him if that was all he knew how to play. The boy replied that at that very moment he remembered one other tune he had heard as a child from his grandmother, who used to sing it softly to him. When the notes of the violin again filled the room, we all shook with emotion: it was the tune to the well-known Yiddish song "Es Brent" ("Brothers, Our Town Is Burning"). The sound of the Polish youth's violin pierced our hearts. The four people in the room sat agape. Slowly, we joined in, singing the words in Yiddish: Es Brent! Bredlerlekh, Es Brent!

But the boy knew not one word of the song, only the melody. After hearing his playing we realized that his soul must have a Jewish spark. He told us that his grandmother was Jewish. He added that as a child in Communist Poland, he had heard her singing this melody very quietly, in secret, and he had remembered it. Placing my hand on his shoulder, I asked him to play this melody the next day, on the scorched earth of Birkenau. In my mind's eye, I could see the hundreds of youth marching up with their backpacks on their backs, looking as if they were on a school trip. But when the boy would stand up to play this familiar melody, he would create the right mood and focus their attention. And this is indeed what happened: at the sound of his violin, there was no need for the usual shouts into the microphone of: "Quiet, quiet."

Seven hundred youth from all over the world, accompanied by adults, began their tour of the Auschwitz museum. This was the first time in their lives they had seen the suitcases, hair, and prayer shawls that had belonged to the living human beings who were butchered on that soil. Dr. Alvin Schiff, director of the New York Board of Jewish Education, blew the shofar under the sign reading ARBEIT MACHT FREI (work brings freedom), and then the march began.

Arms linked, without a word, the youngsters and adults marched, wearing sky-blue jackets with white Stars of David on their backs, down the train tracks that had led the trains to Auschwitz. From there we continued to the crematorium of Birkenau, carrying eighteen Israeli flags the whole way. I had objected to the idea that each delegation should march with its own flag. I thought it more appropriate for all of us to walk in unison behind the Israeli flag; it gave a place like Auschwitz a special meaning from our unique perspective. I sensed that we came to this place to demonstrate that the Jewish nation has its own flag - blue and white, like the colors of the tallis, with a Magen David (Star of David) in the center- and there is no other. The delegation accepted my suggestion.

I marched at the head of the line until we reached the ramp across from the place where the accursed Josef Mengele had carried out his selections. All that remained there was a single hut. Someone had affixed to it a photograph of Jewish prisoners standing in line in front of Mengele, his thumb outstretched toward them. That thumb had determined the human fates, signaling who would go to the right and who to the left, who to life and who to death. Then the sound of the violin pierced the air, and all fell silent. Softly, the marchers joined in, singing the words to the song along with the melody of the violin:

It is burning, brothers, it is burning.  
Our poor little town, a pity, burns!  
Furious winds blow,  
Breaking, burning, and scattering,  
And you stand there  
With folded arms.  
Oh, you stand and look  
While our town burns.

The voice of the violin shook the souls of all those who were present. The violinist, who did not even know the words of the song he was playing, the one his Jewish grandmother had sung to him in childhood, was wearing a blue kippah on top of his mane of blond hair. From the top of the ramp, I watched the line as it marched along the barbed wire fence .

All together, we numbered about a thousand people, all wearing blue and white - youngsters, adults, and elderly Holocaust survivors, including Yechiel Reichman, of Montevideo, a witness at the Demjanjuk trial, and Chaim Basok, a partisan and fighter in the Vilna ghetto.

In one row, I saw a young man wrapped in his tallis, and as he came closer, I saw that it was yellowed with age. I signaled for him to approach, and asked for his name and hometown. "I'm Mendle Kaplan, from Capetown, South Africa," he answered. Later he became chairman of the World Jewish Congress. I asked why he had wrapped himself in that tallis. "My father was born in Lithuania," he replied, "not far from here. My father left me with nothing but this tallis and his tefillin.

He told me, 'No matter where you go, don't forget that you are a Jew.' This is not the proper time of day to lay tefillin, but I feel an obligation to my father to wrap myself in his tallis in this awful place. I have the feeling that my father is proud, that he knows that with this tallis, I am demonstrating the continuity of Jewish existence.

We arrived in Auschwitz on Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), 27 Nisan 5748 (April 14, 1988). Snow was falling. Just as we heard the blast of the shofar at the entrance gate, the snow stopped falling and the sun peeked out. When Benjamin Muller began the ceremony by chanting El Maleh Rachamim, the snow began to fall once more. Sunshine and snow mingled together, as though the sky were weeping along with us. I went up to the microphone and read from Psalms : I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the lord. God has chastised me, but He has not delivered me to death... For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed some eleventh grade girls taking head coverings and scarves out of their backpacks and covering their heads. They sensed that this was a prayer and thought they were doing the right thing by donning a head covering. Since they were not yet married, this obligation did not apply to them, but I appreciated the emotional power of their spontaneous gesture.

Elie Wiesel led the afternoon service in the Vizhnitz style, as he had learned growing up in Sighet (present-day Sighetu Marmatiei, Romania). We lit six torches in memory of the victims and ended the ceremony by singing the traditional Ani Ma'amin ("I believe in the coming of the Messiah") prayer and "Hatikvah," Israel's national Anthem.

Since then, I have participated and led several Marches of the Living. I always speak about the place where we stand as the Jewish people's largest cemetery. I remind the youth that the duration of the March of the Living continues through Israel's Memorial Day for fallen soldiers and its Independence Day. When we return to Jerusalem, I tell them to kiss the ground. Those who go on to Israel from Poland no longer have any doubt in their minds about our right to our own homeland. As we sing in Lecha Dodi, Arise, Leave from then midst of the turmoil / Long enough have you sat in the valley of tears. From my experience and observation, the Jews who come from other countries around the world to participate in the March of the Living return from it with a deeper commitment to Israel, while the Israelis go home more conscious of their Jewish identity.

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***Pages 71-72 describe Rabbis Lau's famous experience with an American soldier shortly after his liberation.***

After the liberation of the camp, I stayed in Buchenwald for a while. Buchenwald was in the suburbs of the city of Weimar, the home of Goethe and Schiller. Ironically, the concentration camp was just a ten minute walk from the German national theater, a bastion of German culture. After the liberation, General Patton decided to invite the residents of Weimar to the camp insisting that they view the horrors with their own eyes.

I was wandering around the camp, free and fearless, when I saw the Weimar residents, mostly women and elderly men. Suddenly, a command car stopped suddenly next to me, and a giant American soldier lifted me. Gripping my heels in one hand and my shoulder with the other, he raised me high in the air and shouted in German to the Weimar residents :

"Do you see this little boy ? This is who you have been fighting for the past six years. Because of him you started a world war. He is the enemy of national Socialism, the Nazis' archenemy. A little Polish boy ! You murdered his father and mother, and you almost murdered him as well ! You followed the Fuhrer- for this? You followed him in blind faith - for this?! "

The women sobbed, but I was filled with pride. The American soldier who lifted me up made his passionate exhortation to the Germans, whom I hated with all my soul. He spoke on behalf of me, my parents, and, indeed, the entire Jewish people.