

# Growing Up With a Shadow

By Arnon Mishkin

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Thank you, Marcelo and Felicia.

A month ago, I got a call from BJ asking whether I would speak about what it means to be the child of Holocaust survivors. I have always found the subject very difficult to discuss. After all, I didn't do anything except be born, in the wake of both sets of grandparents having been killed while my parents survived. So I want to talk today about what I have observed, what it is like to go on living when it is clearly possible that one may not have—because I think this is a heritage we all share.

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One of the early readings during the Yamim Nora'im—on the second day of Rosh Hashanah—is the story of the binding of Isaac. I have always considered this story problematic. Many view it as a test of faith, or as a demonstration of the basic goodness of God. I have always shied away from the story. Then I saw the Kurt Weill Opera *The Eternal Road*. In it he presents the story as the first time when the Jewish people are threatened with extinction. For if Abraham's son is killed, who will come after? It is the story of the first survivor.

The road my family took and managed to survive began in Eastern Europe. Before 1937, my father, Eliezer Mishkin, had made his way from Poland to what was then Palestine to join his older brother and sister. He left behind his parents and younger brother and sister. My mother, Esther Rubin, was in Kovno, Lithuania, with her family. Her father, Pinchas, had considered emigrating earlier to England but decided it was not possible. Her eldest brother, Aaron, had moved to Palestine in the early 1930s.



Esther Rubin (bottom right), with Pinchas, Isaac (their father), Aaron, Srolik and Esther Rubin, before Pinchas left for Palestine (1930)

A few years ago, the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. had an exhibit on the Kovno Ghetto and the way life was led there. The museum invited survivors of the town—and their

children—to a private showing. My mother took my daughters, Allison and Pamela, and myself. Pamela was about 3, and as she was being carried around on my shoulder (museums are kind of boring for 3-year-olds). She was probably thinking, “What are all these pictures and people and things from a long time ago trying to say?” As the adults were talking, she said, “Grandma, I have a question.” None of us paid too much attention. She kept at it: “Grandma, I have a question.” Finally, we paid attention. And she asked. “Grandma, why didn’t they kill you?”

It may not be the most polite question (and at age 8, I suspect she is already embarrassed about the story) but it is the question that most puzzles and remains: Not, why did they die, but why did I live?

Earlier today, we read a portion from the Torah describing the rules of Yom Kippur. It is the story of Aaron in the wake of the death of his two sons. Now why the two sons died is not clear. The Midrash has a few explanations ranging from Aaron helping to build the golden calf to the sons’ failure to provide offerings in the proper way. But the impact is clear. Aaron has feelings of guilt and feels the need to make atonement, so he sacrifices the two goats and the bull. The question the story is raising is not why did they die, but it is Pammie’s question: Why did Aaron not die? And, if he did not die, what did he do that prevented it ... what must he do to make amends for the sins that he surely has. Indeed the Bible says that not only must Aaron atone for his sins, but every year all of us who are living must spend a day in atonement.

We have all read about “survivor guilt.” To have lived through the war, or to have suffered at close range to it, is to have witnessed or have felt the true extent of how terribly humanity can act. From a very early age, I have tried to resolve two conflicting emotions: a sense of how powerless I would be in the face of that horror and the struggle to make one’s own life normal in the face of that burden.

My parents did not hide the facts of the war from me. Indeed, my mother told many stories about her life in the Kovno Ghetto, often probably edited for young children, some of them almost funny. There was the commandant of the ghetto: You know the movies where the German soldiers are always perfectly dressed. Well, this guy always used to forget to button his fly.

When Eichmann was captured and put on trial in Israel in 1961, my brother and—just 6 and 7 years old at the time—were required to stay up late and watch it on television, even on a school night. The following days during recess, I was quite surprised that my friends had not been watching. I remember getting a great sense of comfort seeing him behind the bullet proof glass, thinking that evil has been trapped and the world is now better.

I had a question that is even more embarrassing than Pammie’s. When I was very young—I like to think I was only 5 but maybe older than I would care to remember—I got up the courage to

ask my mother something that had been bothering me for a while. This can either be explained as 5-year-old naivete or as an indication of the security one feels growing up in Brooklyn Heights under the shadow of the Manhattan skyline. So I asked, “So Mom, why didn’t your family just call the police?”

My mother presented one side of the Holocaust. How Hitler’s attempt to destroy the Jewish people failed. She had seen the worst that humanity can offer and she has refused to go over to the side of despair.



Esther Rubin and her father, at about 3 (1926)



Esther’s mother, Hadassah, walking in Kovno (c 1938)



Esther Mishkin, née Rubin, visiting the houses of the Kovno Ghetto (1997)

My father had a very different experience. He had not directly suffered, but you could feel the loss he suffered every day.

My father was one of those people who, having lost his family in the war, tried to smother his guilt through work. Later in life, I would learn that he had told his older brother and sister that they need not worry about their parents and remaining siblings in Poland, since the British would prevent Hitler from fulfilling his plans. I do not know in what camp they finally were killed. But, I do know that for my father the pain was too great and he refused fully to talk about what had happened to them. I do know that he knew what happened to his parents, as after the war, he shared his room with his cousin, who had come to Palestine from Auschwitz. He went through life with the pain of knowing how horrible the world can become and the guilt of feeling powerless to have done anything to stop it. He was unable to find a goat on which to place his feelings of guilt. His firm silence gave a measure of the depths of the horror.

My mother’s stories were far easier to take. For most of the war, Kovno was a labor camp, not a death camp. It was not until she first took us to Yad Vashem in 1967 that she realized that she

was in a forced labor camp. She studied the map of Europe and said: So that's why they didn't move us to one of the death camps until later in the war.

I'm tempted to say she was fortunate. Jewish life went on and is well recorded in several published diaries and collections of photos. It was a life of horror but also hope, of public hangings and secret pregnancies and births and brides, of people running away from the ghetto and joining the partisans, as well as getting caught and getting shot.

Her stories have always carried that conflicting message: In the face of the worst that humanity can dish out, you should never give up hope, because then you lose.

She told us about the time when they were first moved into the ghetto, and the Nazis confiscated most of her parents' possessions, including the piano and her mother's oxygen machine. She begged the soldier to let her mother keep the machine that was needed for her mother's asthma. Not realizing what she was getting into, she ran to the place where their things had been placed and found an older soldier guarding them and begged him to let her take the machine for her sick mother. He took pity on the crying 18-year-old and allowed her to take the machine. As she returned to her house, a German soldier shot his gun, but missed. She started crying and he yelled at her, "Now you brought back your mother's machine. If ever you do it again, I will really shoot you."

She lived in the ghetto with her parents, Isaac and Hadassah, her brothers Aaron and Israel, Aaron's wife Esia, and their daughter Rina, age 5. On several occasions the Nazis conducted Kinder Aktionen, where they would search the houses looking for children, who were not needed in a labor camp and would be taken out and killed. Sometimes the rumor mill provided warnings. Once they did not get any warning. The Nazis rushed in shortly after Rina had gone to bed and forced the adults to leave the house. They searched the house but found nothing. The family ran to the bedroom Rina shared with her mother, grandmother, and aunt, and found her under the heavy blanket, frozen in fear and white as a sheet. When they told her everything was fine, my 5-year-old first cousin said, "You see: I fooled them again."

At times, my mother would not wear her yellow star, particularly early on when there was more travel between the ghetto and the city of Kovno. Once, a Nazi soldier saw her and pulled a gun and said he was going to shoot her. Fortunately, it was right near her house. Her brother saw it, came out, slapped her, and yelled, "How many times have I told you not to do this?" And the Nazi decided she could get off with yet another warning.

But you can only escape and fool them for so long. As the allies began to liberate Europe and got close to Lithuania, the Nazis began to dismantle the ghetto and take the Jews to concentration camps. As the Russians marched in, my uncles sent my mother off to hide in the

attic of a sawmill. They stayed behind with their parents. My mother spent 11 days on that floor with a little bit of water to drink.

After the Germans left, she began to make her way through Eastern Europe and got smuggled into Palestine. My grandparents, uncles, aunt, and cousin were not so lucky: They were shot in the final days of the ghetto.

I had no part in these stories. I only heard them. But to hear them itself is important.



On the way to Palestine after the war

This Yom Kippur is very special for my brother and me. Our father died this year, and it is the first time we have stayed for Yizkor. With my father's death, as with the deaths of so many others, we are losing some of our last links with the Shoah and the depths of loss and suffering that it represents.

Maintaining the memory of those links is essential because we need to understand the true dimensions of humanity. To be a child of survivors is not to have suffered or to be a hero. It is, first, to know—at close hand—what some people can do and how evil people can be. Second, it is to feel a sense of responsibility, to fight to make the world a better place, or at the least to feel lucky to have grown up in the security of the shadow of the skyline of Manhattan.

And that is what has made this past month so challenging, because it has shown that we are not really so lucky. Indeed, in New York today we are all survivors. For those who were very close—who were there and escaped, who happened to be late for work that day, or who were on the right floor of the towers, or my colleague who was ordered to take the Monday night flight from Boston to LA, not the Tuesday one—I have a feeling my daughter's question rings true: How did I manage to escape?

But those who were across town or even out of town, are survivors—or children of survivors—too. Because we realize that despite the security of this city and this country, there are times, when the question, "Why didn't you just call the police?" is truly irrelevant.

I am always uncomfortable when people use Nazis as a point of comparison, but I do think there is a straight line from Auschwitz to the World Trade Center. In both cases, human individuals, who were human enough to not button their fly or to get too drunk in a Florida bar, were organized to commit the worst sort of evil acts.

And so Aaron—and all of us—needs to atone for the sins—the sins we committed or the sins we imagine—as we live in the wake of darkness.



Arnon and his wife and daughters

*Arnon Mishkin and his wife, Susan Fine, have been members of BJ since the late 1980s. They have two grown children, Pamela and Allison, who runs children services at BJ on the high holidays. Arnon grew up in Brooklyn with his brother Jonathan, who often comes to BJ. Arnon works as a management consultant, primarily for media and healthcare companies.*