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Where Are We Sixty-One Years Later

**By
Eva Fogelman**

Michael Levine grew up in Philadelphia. After visiting Israel at age 16, he told his parents that he had a desire to immigrate to Israel. At age 18 he made Aliya and spent some time in Kibbutz Yavneh before going into the army. He was on the customary leave for a month, for soldiers from abroad, when the war in the north started on July 12, 2006. He shortened his stay when he found out his battalion was called to fight.

Michael Levine is described by his friends as the sweetest and most humble person who felt everything is in God's hands. He didn't want people to pray for his survival in battle. He always felt that his grandfather was his major inspiration whose shoes he could never fill. His grandfather and grandmother are concentration camp survivors.

On Tisha B'Av, the ninth of Av, a day of national mourning for the Jewish people, just a few weeks ago, Michael Levine was buried after fighting in battle in Lebanon as a first sergeant in the paratrooper's brigade. Two thousand mourners gathered at the Israel Military Cemetery on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

Michael Levine was a third generation of Holocaust survivor. I would like us to think about whether his willingness to fight for Israel's survival is a characteristic of members of the third generation or a moral responsibility of second and third generation, and does it come with the territory. For Michael Levine a quintessential value to make a difference for the future of the Jewish people informed his courage to join the Israeli army three years ago.

I am not suggesting that all members of the second, third and fourth generations of Shoah survivors are informed by a moral compass to save the Jewish people or other persecuted groups. But as a group we have a heightened empathy towards pain and suffering. And, the only definitive psychological finding on the third generation so far is that they tend to go into the helping professions twice as much as their peers whose grandparents are American born Jews.

With so many genocides and persecutions of peoples since the Nazi Holocaust we the survivors and their heirs are being called upon to be moral voices. When I and other Jewish activists met with the Dalai Lama in New York a few years ago, he said: "The Jewish people have a secret, the secret of survival; we need you to share it with us." He went on to ask, "How did you find the resilience to go on with your lives after the Holocaust?"

And indeed, sixty-one years after liberation, survivor voices are important to be heard not only about the Jewish life that was destroyed, the persecution of the Jews, but also to talk about rebirth and resilience. Psychologically, survivors' long-term reactions to their losses and persecution is contrary to common wisdom. Let's face it, survivors are an anomaly since their liberation. When Ben Gurion sent envoys to the displaced persons camps in Germany, Austria and Italy he expected to find people who were emotionally disturbed, and he was hesitant to bring them to Palestine. Fifty per-cent of those who fought for the independence of the State of Israel were survivors. When the psychiatrists met they did not know how they would be able to handle so many emotionally distressed people. Instead, most of them asked for work. The psychiatrists had to send for social-workers. And indeed, most survivors succeed professionally, even without an education.

Parenthetically, the largest study done in this regard by John Sigal and Weinfeld showed that Holocaust survivors had less education than Canadian Jews who were not in Europe during World War II, but financially the survivors fared better than their counterparts. Let me share one more anomaly. Children who are abused in early childhood are known to become abusers. Among the survivors that is a rare phenomenon. It does exist, I won't tell you it doesn't, but no where to the extent that was expected. A follow-up study by Israeli novelist Aaron Meged of the Solvino children, a chateau in Italy of orphaned child survivors, showed a handful who were struggling in interpersonal relations and professions in Israel. Not a one was ever convicted of any crimes. Are survivors in pain, do they get re-traumatized with incidents such as September 11 or the war in the north? Some do. Therefore, it implies some do not. Those who are more vulnerable during new cataclysmic disasters are experiencing more upheaval during such times and need emotional support.

What has facilitated the survivors healing such massive trauma is that the pain and suffering that was endured was validated by the outside world. The reparation and restitution programs although have added further persecution in how they are handled by the Germans and Swiss and other countries, but it is one symbolic gesture of acknowledging culpability for a crime against humanity. It may not seem like much and will never be enough, but the Armenians, the Native Americans, have still not gotten validation for their suffering. The Holocaust commemorations, mandatory Holocaust education, oral history projects have added to the validation and enhancing the potential for future generations to remember.

But at the same time, we the second and third and fourth generation cannot be complacent. Just because Steven Spielberg conducted 50,000 interviews with survivors it does not mean that all have been interviewed. There are still others who want to share their story. They need a vehicle. The Holocaust child survivors were an afterthought. No one thought they can verbalize their experiences, nor share a sequential narrative. Thanks to the late Dr. Judith and Milton Kestenberg, the child survivors had a voice. And thanks to Myriam Abramowitz for bringing hidden child survivors out of hiding. Though some are still in hiding – hiding their Jewish identity, hiding their pain, hiding their fears, hiding their love – they feel they are protecting themselves from further abandonment, humiliation, and re-traumatization. But many of you have come out of hiding. A gathering such as this gets new people to come out of hiding every year. And thanks to Helen Epstein and Menachem Rosensaft for giving second-generation a voice and vehicles for expression of moral responsibility.

And why can't the second, third and fourth generation be complacent? The role of the survivor generation was to start to build families and communities, mourn losses, develop vehicles for commemoration, education, alert the world of other genocides, build the State of Israel, and be moral voices in times of crisis. As Rabbi Hillel has taught us, the survivor generation's task was to start the process in all these arenas, not to finish the tasks.

Yes, we have mandatory Holocaust education in many states throughout the United States. But I cannot stress enough that future generations need to continue to monitor what is being taught. The Holocaust deniers, such as the engineer Arthur Butz who wrote *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*, have become reference works that future deniers are using in their teachings such as, "the Jews need the Holocaust story and anti-Germanism to maintain Jewish collective identity." Arno Mayer, the author of *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* explains that from 1942 to 1945, certainly at Auschwitz, but probably overall, more Jews were killed by so called 'natural' causes than by 'unnatural' ones. Mayer cautions against the use of testimonies of survivors because they are suspect of being influenced by subjective factors. We have learned that we cannot fight with Holocaust deniers, but as Mahli Lieblich, a daughter of survivors teaches us, if the deniers want to magically make the Holocaust disappear, then let them also take responsibility for the six million murdered Jews and magically make them reappear. When they achieve this they will have credibility.

Another cautionary note for future generations. The second generation was at times too zealous to teach their children about the destruction of European Jewry. Some of those in the second generation who felt their parents silence, their secrets, their pain all without knowing the details wanted to ensure that their children know from a very young age. Raising Jewish children is a challenge. The challenge is to give them a positive Jewish identity and caring community. By injecting young children with the fact that we Jews are eternal victims without giving them the joy of yiddishkeit, we will lose them as Jews. Be vigilant about others who want to be overzealous by teaching your children a "lachrymose" reading of Jewish history—that Jewish history is a history of antisemitism, *which it is not!*—rather than an account that celebrates the positive aspects of Jewish history and Jewish life: cultural, religious, social, political, literary.

These past few weeks we have been reading on Shabbath Sefer Devarim—the Book of Deuteronomy. We need to recall that Devarim, which takes place the last few weeks before the death of Moses, at the very end of the forty-year sojourn in the desert, is addressed NOT to those Jews who left Egypt, but to the "Second Generation." The generation of those who left Egypt could not enter the Land of Israel—they were psychologically still slaves—and they died in the desert. Only those of the new generation, who were not slaves, who understood what it was to be a nation, could enter the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is a powerful retelling of Jewish history, and a restatement of our normative tradition, for this Second Generation who would carry the torch of freedom, of peoplehood and of nationhood, forward into a new land.

Just as in Deuteronomy, in the retelling of historical events, such as the creation of the Golden Calf, certain nuances changed, so too the child survivors, the second, the third and onward will each tell the story with different emphasis and interpretations. But the essential text written orally and verbally by the survivor generation is what is fundamental. The Dalai Lama understands that the texts we Jews have is what has kept us as a people in the diaspora for 2,000 years.

As the older survivors are dying, we, the child survivor generation, the second, third and fourth generations are responsible for giving them waning years and burial with dignity. The resilience of the survivor generation is diminished with the aging process and we who are witness to that have the responsibility to be their spokespersons when others do not understand their special needs in this time in their lives.

We all cannot be as brave as Michael Levine and try to save the Jewish people or the world, but we can remember his courage and with each passing day think of one act we can do to make a difference to enhance someone's life, and with that we will make it a better world.

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