

A PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES LESSON PLAN

THE CHILD SURVIVOR OF BUCHENWALD

*He was seven when his mother pushed him toward his
older brother in the men's line. The brothers survived.
The younger became Chief Rabbi of Israel.*

GRADES 11-12

EPISODE SUMMARY

About This Film



Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel 1993–2003 — the seven-year-old of this story, the 38th generation of his family's rabbinic line. Source: archival.

Yisrael Meir Lau — called “Lulek” — was born in Piotrków Trybunalski, Poland, on June 1, 1937, the youngest of three sons of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau, the last chief rabbi of the town and, by his own reckoning, the 37th generation of an unbroken rabbinic line. In October 1942 the Nazis beat the rabbi for refusing to shave his beard and deported him to Treblinka, where he was murdered. Before he was taken, he charged his elder son, Naftali: *“I am the 37th generation. The Germans want to break this chain. If you survive, be a father to Yisrael. The chain must not break.”*

In November 1944, on a deportation platform, seven-year-old Yisrael's mother, Chaya, pushed him toward Naftali in the men's line; she was taken away and murdered at Ravensbrück. Naftali kept the boy with him. In January 1945 he smuggled Yisrael into Buchenwald hidden in a sack. In the camp's Block 8, a Soviet prisoner of war (from Rostov-on-Don, Russia) named Feodor Mikhailichenko fed the child stolen potatoes and knit him earmuffs — protecting him as a Polish child, not as a Jewish one — while Naftali slipped him pieces of bread. Behind them lay two years of forced labor, from about the age of five and a half, pushing iron-wheeled glass carts at the Hortensja factory in Piotrków.

On April 11, 1945, the U.S. 6th Armored Division liberated Buchenwald. Army chaplain Rabbi Herschel Schacter found a frightened boy and asked, *“How old are you, my child?”* *“I am older than you,”* the boy answered — *“You laugh and cry like a child, but I haven't laughed in years.”* At seven years and ten months, Yisrael was the youngest known prisoner of Buchenwald. He reached Haifa on July 15, 1945, aboard the RMS Mataroa, by way of the OSE children's home at Écouis, France; was raised by an aunt and uncle in Haifa; and entered a Jerusalem yeshiva at his bar mitzvah. He served as Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1993 to 2003 and has chaired the Yad Vashem Council since 2008 — the 38th generation, the chain his father died to protect held, above all, by his brother's hand.

TIME 45 min core / 90 min with extensions	MATERIALS Device to play the 90-second video; Student Handout (this packet) — optional to print if projecting.	CONTENT ADVISORY Family separation and the murder of both parents (kept off-frame), within the Holocaust. Handled with restraint: no corpses, no on-screen violence; the mother's face is never shown, the father's death is off-frame, and the children are clothed and alive throughout.
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TEACHER NOTE

The film's central claim is that Yisrael did not save himself. He was saved, in turn, by his mother, his brother Naftali, the Soviet prisoner Feodor, and the American chaplain Rabbi Schacter — and the rabbinic chain survived above all because of Naftali's self-sacrifice in keeping their father's charge. Guard against retelling this as a story of a self-rescuing child; the point is the people who carried him. (Note: this episode's public release is pending Rabbi Lau's own approval; these classroom materials are drafts prepared in that spirit.)

MINUTE-BY-MINUTE

Two Ways to Run This Lesson

45-Minute Single Period

MIN MARK	LENGTH	ACTIVITY
0–6	6	Step 1 • Before Viewing. Vocabulary preview and the Anticipation write.
6–12	6	View the microshort twice — once for feeling, once for detail (90 sec each, with a pause between).
12–26	14	Step 2 • Analyze. Guided discussion of the comprehension / analysis questions.
26–39	13	Step 3 • Create. The writing task (letter / MEAL paragraph / essay plan).
39–42	3	60-second recall check (low-stakes), then begin Step 4.
42–45	3	Step 4 • Reflect. Exit prompt and a brief grounding close.

90-Minute Block

MIN MARK	LENGTH	ACTIVITY
0–10	10	Step 1 • Before Viewing. Vocabulary, the map/timeline orientation aid, and the Anticipation write.
10–18	8	View the microshort twice — once for feeling, once for detail — with a brief settle between passes.
18–40	22	Step 2 • Analyze. Full discussion; move into small groups for the sourcing / historiographic questions.
40–43	3	60-second recall check (low-stakes) and transition.
43–70	27	Step 3 • Create. Drafting, then a short peer share.
70–83	13	Going Deeper. Launch the Extension activity, or continue discussion in depth.
83–90	7	Step 4 • Reflect. Reflection and a grounding close.

Both plans view the film twice (feeling, then detail) and place the 60-second recall check immediately before the Reflect step. Timings are a guide — give discussion room where a class needs it.

DRIVING QUESTION

What does it take to keep a chain unbroken when everything is built to break it?

A father, hours from deportation, gives his charge to the older son, not the younger. A mother, on a platform, pushes her boy toward the men's line and is taken. A Soviet prisoner of war feeds a Polish child stolen potatoes. An American chaplain kneels to a boy who says he is older than a grown man. This lesson sits with a hard truth the film insists on: Yisrael did not save himself. The chain survived because others — above all his brother Naftali — carried it. The question is what that cost, what it meant, and what an unbroken line asks of those who inherit it.

LESSON OBJECTIVES · GRADES 11–12

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. **Evaluate** the ethical choices the film makes in refusing to show the mother's face, the father's death, and any corpse at liberation — and what depiction owes the dead.
2. **Compare** the memoir wording of the Schacter exchange with the Project Witness interview variant, and assess what the differences reveal about testimony, memory, and the reliability of primary sources.
3. **Construct** a 350–450-word evidence-based analytical essay on transmission and continuity as a Jewish response to genocide, tracing the documented arc from the father's 1942 charge through Yisrael's liberation from Buchenwald in 1945 to his 1993 election as Chief Rabbi — the 38th generation.

STEP 1 OF 4

Watch



A study hall (Vortragssaal) of the Piotrków synagogue, before the war — the living Jewish community into which Yisrael was born in 1937, the son of the city's last chief rabbi. Source: archival, public domain.

Vocabulary Preview

Survivor

A person who lived through the Holocaust. Yisrael Meir Lau was the youngest known prisoner to survive Buchenwald — seven years and ten months old at liberation.

Liberation

The moment Allied soldiers reached a Nazi camp and set the prisoners free. American troops liberated Buchenwald on April 11, 1945.

Chaplain

A religious leader who serves alongside soldiers in an army. Rabbi Herschel Schacter was a U.S. Army chaplain who entered Buchenwald with the liberating troops and found the frightened boy.

Righteous Among the Nations

The honor Yad Vashem gives to non-Jews who risked their own lives to protect Jews during the Holocaust. Feodor Mikhailichenko, the Soviet prisoner of war (from Rostov-on-Don, Russia) who fed Yisrael stolen potatoes, received it in 2009.

Generations

The links of a family passed from parents to children. Yisrael's father called himself "the 37th generation" of an unbroken line of rabbis and asked that the chain never break.

Deportation

The forced removal of people from their homes, almost always by train, to ghettos or camps. Yisrael's father was deported to Treblinka; his mother to Ravensbrück.

Testimony

A firsthand account given by a witness or survivor. Rabbi Lau's memoir *Out of the Depths* and Rabbi Schacter's Project Witness interview are two testimonies of the same moment — and they do not word it identically.

Ethics of Representation

The moral questions a filmmaker or historian faces about what may be shown. This film refuses to depict corpses, the mother's face, or the father's death — deliberate choices about what depiction owes the dead.

Anticipation

THINK ABOUT IT

The film never shows the mother's face — only a kerchief, a gloved hand, a shape. The father's murder at Treblinka happens off-screen. There is no corpse at liberation; the boy is found in a doorway's shadow. These are deliberate refusals. And the film's most quoted line — the boy telling an American chaplain "*I am older than you*" — survives in more than one wording across the sources. Come prepared to defend an interpretation of what a film, and a witness, owe both to the truth and to the dead.

View the Microshort — 90 Seconds

Show the film in full,
twice

— once for feeling, once for detail. Students should not write during the first viewing; on the second pass they may jot brief notes. The goal is full, attentive viewing before analysis.

Watch: projectwitness.org/videos/microshort-ep5-child-survivor



Scan with any phone camera, or paste the link above into a browser.

STEP 2 OF 4

Analyze



The main gate of Buchenwald, its ironwork reading Jedem das Seine — “to each what he is due.” In January 1945 Naftali smuggled his seven-year-old brother into this camp hidden in a sack. Source: archival.

Rhetorical Analysis

1. The film carries the murder of both parents without showing either death. Analyze how narration, sound, and image do that work. What is gained by the restraint — and is anything lost?
2. The emotional center is the boy's reply to Rabbi Schacter: *"You laugh and cry like a child, but I haven't laughed in years."* The exclamation point marks quiet incredulity, not a shout. How does that tone change what the line means, and what it asks of the viewer?
3. The thesis of the piece is that the chain survived not because of Yisrael but because of his brother Naftali's self-sacrifice. How does a 90-second film shift credit away from its own protagonist — and why is that a moral choice, not merely a narrative one?

Historiographic Questions

4. Compare the memoir wording of the Schacter exchange with the Project Witness interview variant, in which the boy's elaboration runs closer to "I stopped crying a long time ago and didn't smile for the longest time." What do the differences between two firsthand tellings reveal about testimony and memory?
5. Rabbi Lau became Chairman of the Yad Vashem Council — a survivor who became a guardian of memory. What does it mean for a witness to become an institution that preserves the testimony of others?
6. The film refuses to show corpses, the mother's face, and the father's death. What does depiction owe the dead? Where does showing become exploitation, and where does not-showing become evasion? Defend a principle, not just a preference.

TEACHER NOTE

Teacher note: If students do not surface the concept of the *ethics of representation* organically in the Step 2 discussion, introduce it here as a frame for what the film just performed — and refused to perform. Ask why a film about a murdered family shows no corpse, no gas, and never the mother's face.

STEP 3 OF 4

Create



U.S. Army chaplain Rabbi Herschel Schacter, who entered Buchenwald with the liberating troops and found the frightened boy. Project Witness interviewed him in the Bronx. Source: archival.

Analytical Essay • Transmission and Continuity After Genocide

In October 1942, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau told his elder son, Naftali: *"I am the 37th generation... the chain must not break."* Forty-eight years after Yisrael's liberation from Buchenwald in 1945, in 1993, his youngest son became Chief Rabbi of Israel — the 38th generation. Using this story as a case study, write an **evidence-based analytical essay** (2–3 paragraphs, 350–450 words) that addresses the following:

P R O M P T

Analyze how the Lau family's survival *documents* transmission — the deliberate handing-down of faith, name, and identity across generations — as a historical response to an attempt at total erasure. By what mechanism was continuity actually carried (the father's charge; Naftali's fulfillment of it)? And how do the surviving sources — Rabbi Lau's memoir, the family accounts, the Project Witness interviews — let us reconstruct it, including where those sources word the same moment differently?

This is an analytical essay, not a personal one — make a clear argumentative claim and support it with specific evidence from the historical record (the father's charge, Naftali's role, the murders at Treblinka and Ravensbrück, the 1993 chief-rabbinate, and the source record itself, noting where the Schacter exchange is worded differently across sources). Save the personal and ethical questions for your Step 4 reflection.

STEP 4 OF 4

Reflect

Before we reflect — a 60-second recall check

60-SECOND RECALL · LOW-STAKES

No grade — a 60-second warm-up before we reflect. From memory.

A. Match each term to its meaning (write the letter):

1. Testimony — (__)
2. Primary source — (__)
3. Ethics of representation — (__)
 - a. Evidence created at the time of an event or by someone who lived it.
 - b. A firsthand account given by a witness or survivor.
 - c. The moral questions about what a film or historian may show.

B. Order the geography (1–6): Buchenwald __ · Jerusalem __ · Piotrków __ · Haifa __
· Częstochowa __ · Écouis __



The eternal flame in the Hall of Remembrance at Yad Vashem, its floor inscribed with the names of the death camps. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau — the child survivor become a guardian of memory — has chaired the Yad Vashem Council. The chain his father died for, held. Source: archival.

Open-Ended Reflection on Memory, Loss, and Continuity

The film shows a chain unbroken — but it never pretends the cost was repaid. Chaya Lau was murdered at Ravensbrück; Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau at Treblinka. The “38th generation” exists precisely because the 37th was killed. Yisrael was saved, but he was saved by others, and only some of those others lived to see it.

Write a sustained reflection (one page) on the following question:

REFLECTION PROMPT

Is the survival of the chain a form of victory — or does calling it victory risk making the losses smaller than they were? What does an unbroken line ask of those who inherit it? And what does a survivor owe to the dead who made his survival possible but did not share it?

Unlike the Step 3 essay, this is **your own reflection** — write in the first person about what the story asks of *you*. There is no single right answer, and you are not required to resolve the tension. The goal is to think rigorously and honestly about what continuity costs and what it demands.

“I am the 37th generation. The Germans want to break this chain... The chain must not break.”

— Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau to his son Naftali, Piotrków, October 1942, as recounted in Rabbi Lau's memoir *Out of the Depths*.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Going Deeper

Historiographic Essay · One Moment, Many Tellings

The exchange between Rabbi Herschel Schacter and the frightened boy is among the most retold moments of the liberation of Buchenwald — and it is not retold identically. Compare how the same moment is rendered across these sources:

- Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, *Out of the Depths* (Sterling, 2011) — the survivor's own memoir.
- Naftali Lau-Lavie, *Balaam's Prophecy* (Koren, 2015) — the elder brother's account.
- The Project Witness primary interviews with Rabbi Lau, with Rabbi Schacter (recorded in the Bronx), and with Naftali Lau-Lavie (recorded in Israel).
- Secondary accounts — the Rabbi Herschel Schacter Foundation, the NPR obituary of Rabbi Schacter, and Yad Vashem / USHMM records.

Write a 2-page historiographic essay examining why firsthand and secondhand tellings of a single event diverge, what each source is positioned to know, and what this teaches us about how the history of the Holocaust is written from testimony.

APPENDIX

Standards Alignment

CODE	WHAT IT REQUIRES	WHERE THIS LESSON MEETS IT
CCSS RI.11-12.1	Cite strong textual evidence, <i>including determining where a text leaves matters uncertain.</i>	Students compare the Schacter exchange as worded in Rabbi Lau's memoir <i>Out of the Depths</i> versus the Project Witness interview, and identify what the sources leave uncertain.
CCSS RH.11-12.3 · RH.11-12.6	Evaluate authors' differing accounts of the same events and assess the reliability of each.	Students weigh two firsthand tellings of the Schacter exchange and evaluate testimony and memory as historical evidence — the core historiographic task of this band.
CCSS RI.11-12.6	Determine point of view or purpose; analyze how style and content advance it.	Analysis of the film's restraint (off-screen deaths, the unshown face) and its deliberate shift of credit to Naftali.
CCSS W.11-12.1 · W.11-12.2	Write arguments and analyses using precise, well-chosen evidence.	The Step 3 evidence-based analytical essay on transmission and continuity, noting where the sources diverge.
C3 D2.His.9-12 · D4.1.9-12	Analyze complex reliability questions across sources; construct arguments acknowledging strengths and limits of the evidence.	The essay acknowledges what the divergent primary accounts can and cannot establish about a single remembered moment.
CCSS SL.11-12.1	Initiate and participate in collaborative discussions on complex texts and issues.	The historiographic discussion of conflicting sources and testimony reliability.

This lesson supports the Holocaust education mandates of more than 25 U.S. states. It addresses New York DASA goals around the dignity of others and the harm of bias, and Holocaust-education objectives on testimony, memory, and the survival of communities targeted for destruction.

PRIMARY SOURCE CITATION

The Testimony of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau

Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, *Out of the Depths: The Story of a Child of Buchenwald Who Returned Home at Last*. Translated by Jessica Setbon and Shira Leibowitz Schmidt. New York: Sterling, 2011. The father's deathbed charge and the exchange with Rabbi Herschel Schacter are recounted in this memoir.

Corroborating accounts: Naftali Lau-Lavie, *Balaam's Prophecy* (Koren, 2015); Yad Vashem (Lau exhibition; Mikhailichenko Righteous Among the Nations file, recognized 25 January 2009); and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum records of the liberation of Buchenwald, 11 April 1945.

Project Witness primary-interview archive: Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau; Rabbi Herschel Schacter (recorded in the Bronx); and Naftali Lau-Lavie (recorded in Israel, months before his passing).