

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 7-8

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 7–8

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

1. **Define** the terms *liberation*, *chaplain*, and *Righteous Among the Nations*, and **describe**, in their own words, who kept Yisrael alive at each stage of the story.
2. **Identify** two specific people who protected Yisrael — his mother, his brother Naftali, Feodor, or Rabbi Schacter — and **recall** one specific act of protection each performed.
3. **Construct** a short letter or paragraph (1–2 paragraphs) from the perspective of Naftali, the older brother, on the day of liberation, addressed to the father who did not survive.

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.

Anticipation

THINK ABOUT IT

This is the true story of a seven-year-old boy who did not save himself — others saved him. A mother made a split-second choice on a train platform. An older brother shared his bread. A Soviet prisoner of war pressed a stolen potato into his hand. An American chaplain knelt down to talk to him. Write two or three sentences before we watch about a time someone protected you when you could not protect yourself — or, if you prefer, about a time you saw someone protect another person. What did it feel like to be kept safe, or to watch someone else be kept safe?

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.

Comprehension Questions

1. Who was Yisrael Meir Lau, and how old was he when the story begins?
2. On the deportation platform, what did his mother do? Why might she have done it?
3. Name two people who helped keep Yisrael alive in the camps, and describe what each one did.
4. When the American chaplain asked how old he was, what did the boy answer? What do you think he meant?

Visual Storytelling

5. The film is animated in a warm, stylized style rather than using real photographs or footage. Why might the filmmakers have chosen not to show real, graphic images of the Holocaust?
6. We never see the mother's face — only a kerchief, a gloved hand, a shape on the platform. What does that choice make you feel? What does it protect?
7. The whole film is only 90 seconds. Did it feel complete? What did the filmmakers leave out, and why might they have made that choice?

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.

Letter Writing

Imagine you are Naftali, the older brother, on the day Buchenwald is liberated — April 11, 1945. You kept the promise you made to your father: your little brother is alive. Write a short letter to your father, who did not survive, telling him what you did to keep Yisrael safe and how you feel now that the war is over.

Your letter should include:

- One specific thing you did to protect Yisrael — smuggling him into the camp, sharing your bread, staying beside him.
- What the hardest moment was.
- What you hope for now, and what you are still carrying.

Write 1–2 paragraphs. Write it as a person, not a report — it is one brother speaking to the father they both lost.

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. Do it from memory.

A. Match each term to its meaning (draw a line, or write the letter):

1. Liberation — (__)
2. Chaplain — (__)
3. Righteous Among the Nations — (__)
 - a. A religious leader who serves with soldiers.
 - b. Yad Vashem's honor for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews.
 - c. The moment Allied soldiers freed a camp.

B. Put the places in order (number 1–5): Buchenwald __ · 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.

One-Sentence Takeaway

Write the single most important thing you are taking away from this lesson in one complete sentence. Then answer: What does it mean to owe your life to other people?

EXIT PROMPT

Complete each part on a notecard or in your journal:

1. The most important thing I'm taking from this story is: ____
2. Someone once kept me safe when I could not keep myself safe — or I once saw someone keep another person safe. That person was ____ and what they did was ____
3. One small thing I could do to protect or help someone else is: ____

Teacher note: Do not force a tidy, triumphant ending. Yisrael survived, but his parents did not. It is honest for a student to hold both the rescue and the loss at once. "I'm not sure how to feel yet" is an acceptable answer.

*“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

Research Project • Others Who Protected

Yisrael was kept alive by people who chose to protect a child at risk to themselves — a brother, a Soviet prisoner of war, an American chaplain. They were not the only ones during the Holocaust who protected the vulnerable. Research one other example — the Danish rescue of Jews in 1943, the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France, or another individual named Righteous Among the Nations. Your research should include:

- Who was protected, and by whom.
- What the protector actually did.
- What the outcome was.
- What risk the protector took.

Create a comparison poster or slide that places your example alongside how Feodor, Naftali, and Rabbi Schacter protected Yisrael. What do these acts of protection have in common? What is different?

APPENDIX

Standards Alignment

CODE	WHAT IT REQUIRES	WHERE THIS LESSON MEETS IT
CCSS RI.7.1 · RI.7.2	Cite textual evidence to support analysis; determine central ideas and summarize accurately.	In Step 2, students draw specific evidence from the 90-second film and the record to answer the comprehension questions and summarize who kept Yisrael alive at each stage.
CCSS RI.7.6	Determine an author's point of view or purpose and analyze how it is conveyed.	Students examine why the filmmakers refuse to show the mother's face or any corpse (Step 2 visual-storytelling questions).
CCSS W.7.3 · W.7.2	Write narrative and informative texts with relevant, accurate detail.	The Step 3 letter from Naftali requires historically accurate detail delivered in a first-person voice.
CCSS SL.7.1	Engage effectively in collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas.	The Analyze discussion and the partner reflection in Step 4.
C3 D2.His.3.6-8 · D2.His.14.6-8	Explain multiple causes and perspectives in a historical event using evidence.	Students trace the chain of protectors and the geography of Yisrael's survival (Piotrków → Haifa).
CASEL — Self- & Social awareness	Recognize others' perspectives and emotions; take the perspective of another.	Perspective-taking in the Naftali letter; the trauma-aware exit reflection.

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).