

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 9–10

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 9–10

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

1. **Analyze** the meaning of the father's charge — *"I am the 37th generation... the chain must not break"* — and explain how Naftali, not Yisrael himself, became the agent who kept it.
2. **Explain** the idea of continuity across generations and how it stood against the Nazi intent to erase a people, using the 37th/38th-generation rabbinic chain as evidence.
3. **Construct** a 150–200-word argumentative paragraph (MEAL structure) on which of Yisrael's protectors most kept the chain unbroken, supported by evidence from the film and the historical record.

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.

Continuity

The unbroken passing of tradition, faith, and family identity from one generation to the next. The Nazis set out to erase it; the Lau family's rabbinic chain nonetheless reached its 38th generation.

Anticipation

THINK ABOUT IT

A father, hours from being taken to his death, gives his charge not to the son who will become famous, but to the older brother: *"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."* What is a "chain" of generations, and what would it take to keep one unbroken through a genocide? Write two or three sentences with your prediction before we watch.

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.

Text-Dependent Analysis

1. The father gives his charge to Naftali, the older brother — not to Yisrael, who would one day become Chief Rabbi. Why does the film insist that the chain survived because of Naftali?
2. Trace the geography of the story: Piotrków → Częstochowa → Buchenwald → Écouis → Haifa → Jerusalem. What does that map reveal about a single life?
3. The narration says the Nazis “want to break this chain.” What is the “chain,” and how is breaking a chain different from killing a single person?
4. The film returns again and again to Yisrael's eyes — as a frightened child, at liberation, and as an adult receiving the Torah. What is the filmmaker arguing by returning to the same eyes?

Historical Sourcing

5. Feodor Mikhailichenko protected Yisrael as a Polish child — not as a Jewish one. Why does keeping that distinction matter to telling his story honestly, rather than making it neater than it was?
6. Feodor was recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in 2009. What criteria does Yad Vashem use for that honor, and how did his actions in Block 8 meet the standard?
7. What questions does the 90-second film leave unanswered that you would want to research further — about Naftali, about the other children of Buchenwald, or about how the family's story was recorded?

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.

Argumentative Paragraph • MEAL Format

Yisrael Meir Lau was protected, in turn, by his mother, by his brother Naftali, by the Soviet prisoner Feodor, and by the American chaplain Rabbi Schacter. The film argues that the chain survived above all because of Naftali's self-sacrifice. Write one well-developed argumentative paragraph using the MEAL structure (**M**ain claim, **E**vidence, **A**nalysis, **L**ink) that answers the following question:

P R O M P T

Of the people who protected Yisrael — his mother, his brother Naftali, Feodor, and Rabbi Schacter — who most kept the chain unbroken, and how do you know? Make a claim and support it with specific evidence from the film and the historical record.

Your paragraph should be 150–200 words. Underline your main claim sentence. Circle your evidence.

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. Deportation — (__)

2. Continuity — (__)

3. Righteous Among the Nations — (__)

a. The unbroken passing of tradition and identity across generations. b. The forced removal of people from their homes to ghettos or camps. c. Yad Vashem's honor for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews.

B. Order the geography of one life (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.

Sentence Frame Reflection

Complete the following sentence frame as a written reflection. You may write as many sentences as you need to complete each thought — the frame is a starting point, not a limit. Be specific.

“Before this, I thought surviving mostly meant _____. This story showed me that Yisrael survived because _____. The person I did not expect to matter so much was _____. A promise that outlives the person who made it _____.”

Teacher note: Push students toward the specific people and acts in the film, not toward general uplift. It is honest to name that the chain held at a terrible price. “I’m not sure yet” is an acceptable answer for the last blank.

Share your reflection with a partner. Where do your reflections overlap? Where do they diverge? What might explain the difference?

*“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 Essay · The Children of Buchenwald

🔗 SCOPE

This is a multi-day research project, not a single-period extension. Plan for at least 3 class periods plus homework time.

Yisrael was not the only child liberated at Buchenwald. Roughly a thousand children and teenagers were found in the camp's children's blocks in April 1945, protected in part by adult prisoners. Many were then taken to children's homes run by the OSE (Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants) in France — including the home at Écouis, from which Yisrael left — before making their way onward, some to Eretz Yisrael aboard ships like the RMS Mataroa. Research the broader story of these child survivors:

- How were children hidden and protected inside Buchenwald (Blocks 8 and 66)?
- What was the role of the OSE and the children's home at Écouis after liberation?
- Where did the children go — France, Eretz Yisrael, the United States — and how were their journeys documented?

Write a 1-page summary of what happened to the child survivors of Buchenwald and why Yisrael Meir Lau's individual story stands within that larger history.

APPENDIX

Standards Alignment

CODE	WHAT IT REQUIRES	WHERE THIS LESSON MEETS IT
CCSS RI.9-10.1 · RI.9-10.4	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence; interpret the meaning of key words and phrases.	The MEAL paragraph cites specific acts of protection; students interpret “chain” and what it means to “break” one.
CCSS RI.9-10.6	Determine point of view or purpose and analyze how rhetoric advances it.	Students analyze why the film credits Naftali, not its own protagonist.
CCSS W.9-10.1	Write arguments to support claims with valid reasoning and relevant evidence.	The Step 3 MEAL argumentative paragraph on which protector most kept the chain unbroken.
C3 D2.His.9-12 · D2.His.16.9-12	Evaluate the credibility of sources and construct evidence-based arguments about the past.	The historical-sourcing questions on Feodor and the Righteous Among the Nations criteria — distinguishing what a rescuer knew from what he did.
CCSS SL.9-10.1	Initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions.	Text-dependent discussion and the partner reflection.
CASEL — + Responsible decision-making	Weigh perspectives and make reasoned, evidence-based judgments.	Judging, with evidence, which protector most kept the chain unbroken.

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).