

Holding the Chain

A one-page facilitation guide for the Yisrael Meir Lau discussion

The pedagogical center

*This lesson asks students to sit with two truths that do not cancel each other: a seven-year-old was carried through the Holocaust by the hands of others — his mother's shove, his brother Naftali's mesiras nefesh, a Soviet prisoner of war's stolen potatoes, an American chaplain's arms — and, at the same time, his parents were murdered and nothing later undid that. **The temptation will be to let the triumphant ending — a survivor who became Chief Rabbi — close the wound. Resist that.** Lulek is saved, never self-rescuing; the chain his father charged survives because of his brother, not because of the boy's toughness. Keep the rescue and the loss visible at the same time. That double vision is the lesson.*

ANTICIPATED MISCONCEPTIONS

- ◆ **"Feodor saved him because he was Jewish."**
Feodor protected Lulek as a Polish child, not a knowingly Jewish one. That does not shrink the rescue — it complicates our picture of whom a rescuer thinks he is saving.
- ◆ **"Lulek survived because he was tough — he saved himself."** He was a small child kept alive by others: his mother pushing him to Naftali, his brother slipping him bread, Feodor's potatoes, Rabbi Schacter lifting him up. Survival here is a chain of other people's acts, not self-rescue.
- ◆ **"The father gave up when they beat him."** Beaten for refusing to shave his beard, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau staggered — then straightened. Read it as resistance and dignity, not surrender; his charge to Naftali is the opposite of giving up.
- ◆ **"The mother's shove happened in 1942, when he was five."** The locked account places it at a deportation platform in November 1944, when Lulek was seven ("He was seven"). Correct the date if it comes up; the earlier five-years-old version is wrong.
- ◆ **"Becoming Chief Rabbi made up for everything he lost."** Hold the irresolution. The chain held — father the 37th generation, Lulek the 38th — and still his mother and father were murdered. Achievement and loss coexist; the honor does not undo the grave.

FACILITATION MOVES

- **Both/and, not either/or.** When a student lands on either "a happy ending" or "a tragedy," ask: "What is the other true thing happening at the same time?" The chain survived AND the family was destroyed.
- **Distinguish the act from the actor.** Feodor's rescue is fully real even though he did not know he was protecting a Jewish child. Honor what he did without rewriting what he knew.
- **Name what we don't know.** Say the open questions aloud: the episode's release still awaits Rabbi Lau's own approval, and the Schacter exchange survives in slightly different wording in the memoir versus the Project Witness interview. Naming the uncertainty is part of an honest answer.
- **Steer past scale collapse.** If a student flattens "I am older than you" into ordinary tiredness or a clever line, ask: "What did this child actually lose that made him say that?" Do not let a stolen childhood shrink to a mood.
- **"I'm not sure yet" is sometimes the right answer.** Where the real question is open — can any later life "answer" this loss? — validate not-knowing rather than pressuring students toward a tidy verdict.

WATCH FOR

- ▀ A student who insists the ending "fixes" the story — gently return them to what remains unhealed.
- ▀ A student distressed by the parents' murder (kept off-frame in the film) — check in privately; the lesson permits grief and not-knowing.

- ▀ A student centering Lulek as his own rescuer — redirect to the mother, Naftali, Feodor, and Schacter who carried him.
- ▀ The Anticipation prompt now offers a non-personal branch ("a time you *saw* someone protect another person"). Steer any student for whom the personal version cuts too close toward that branch, and never require a student to disclose their own experience of being protected.

Alignment, Rubrics & Answer Key

Alignment to the USHMM Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust

This lesson is built to honor the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's guidelines. In particular:

- **Avoid simple answers to complex history.** The lesson refuses a tidy, triumphant close; students are explicitly permitted to hold rescue and loss at once, and "I'm not sure yet" is an accepted response.
- **Do not romanticize.** Survival is framed as a chain of others' acts at terrible cost, not the toughness of a self-rescuing child; the murders of both parents are named, not softened.
- **Translate statistics into people; tell individual stories with precision.** One named child, one named brother, one named rescuer — each act specific and sourced.
- **Make responsible methodological choices; weigh testimony.** The 9–10 and 11–12 tiers ask students to compare the memoir and Project Witness accounts of the Schacter exchange and to reason about reliability, rather than treating any single telling as settled fact.
- **Avoid graphic content for shock value.** The film's restraint — no corpse, the mother's face unshown, the father's death off-frame — is treated as a deliberate ethical choice and discussed as such.

Single-point rubrics (teacher-facing)

One-page single-point rubric per band — the same rubric is printed student-facing in each handout. The middle column is the standard; note one specific "area to grow" per student in the last column.

GRADES 7–8 • LETTER FROM NAFTALI

CRITERIA	EVIDENCE OF MEETING THE STANDARD	AREA TO GROW
Historical accuracy	Real people and events named correctly (Naftali, Buchenwald, the sack, the shared bread, liberation April 11, 1945). No invented facts.	
Perspective / empathy	Convincing first-person voice as Naftali; conveys the weight of protecting a younger brother and the father's absence, without melodrama.	
Letter conventions & voice	Uses letter form (greeting, close); sounds like a person speaking, not a report; 1–2 controlled paragraphs.	

GRADES 9–10 • MEAL PARAGRAPH

CRITERIA	EVIDENCE OF MEETING THE STANDARD	AREA TO GROW
Main claim	One clear, arguable claim naming which protector most kept the chain unbroken.	
Evidence (specific)	Cites a specific act from film/record (the shove, the smuggling, the potatoes, the reach), not a general summary.	
Analysis	Explains how the evidence supports the claim; interprets rather than retells.	
MEAL structure	Main claim → Evidence → Analysis → Link, with the Link returning to the claim and larger idea.	
Historical accuracy	All names, places, and dates correct and consistent with the sources.	

GRADES 11–12 · ANALYTICAL ESSAY

CRITERIA	EVIDENCE OF MEETING THE STANDARD	AREA TO GROW
Thesis / argument	Clear, defensible thesis about transmission and continuity as a documented response to genocide.	
Evidence	Specific, well-chosen evidence (the charge, Naftali's role, Treblinka / Ravensbrück, the 1993 chief-rabbinate, the source record).	
Analysis & evaluation	Weights evidence and addresses complexity and cost rather than settling for uplift.	
Historiographic awareness	Names the contested / uncertain — e.g. the memoir-vs-interview wording of the Schacter exchange — and treats testimony as a source to be weighed.	
Historical accuracy	All facts, names, dates, and source attributions accurate.	

Answers / look-for · Step 2 comprehension

Expected factual answers to anchor the Step 2 discussion. Accept student wording; look for the substance below.

GRADES 7–8

- **Who was Yisrael, and how old?** The youngest of three sons of Piotrków's last chief rabbi; born 1937; about seven (seven years, ten months at liberation).
- **What did his mother do on the platform?** Chaya shoved him into the men's line beside Naftali (November 1944); she was taken away and murdered at Ravensbrück.
- **Two who kept him alive?** Naftali (smuggled him into Buchenwald in a sack; shared his bread) and Feodor, the Soviet POW (stolen potatoes, knit earmuffs) — also the mother and Rabbi Schacter.
- **What did the boy answer the chaplain?** “I am older than you” — suffering had aged him beyond his years (“I haven't laughed in years”).

GRADES 9–10

- **Why did the chain survive because of Naftali?** The father charged the elder son to be a father to Yisrael; Naftali did the smuggling and protecting. Yisrael was a small child — carried, not self-rescuing.
- **What does the geography reveal?** Piotrków → Częstochowa → Buchenwald → Écouis → Haifa → Jerusalem: one child carried across the war and home to Eretz Yisrael.
- **Why keep the “Polish child” distinction about Feodor?** Feodor did not know Yisrael was Jewish; honoring him honestly means not neatening the story. Righteous Among the Nations requires risking one's life to save Jews, without payment (recognized 2009).

GRADES 11–12

- **How does the film carry the murders without showing them?** Off-screen deaths, narration and sound implying rather than depicting, no corpse at liberation — gaining dignity and avoiding exploitation.
- **What do the memoir vs. Project Witness wordings reveal?** The Schacter exchange is remembered and worded differently across firsthand tellings; testimony and memory shift while the truth of the moment holds — sources must be weighed for reliability, not taken as identical.
- **What does it mean that the witness became an institution?** Rabbi Lau chaired the Yad Vashem Council: a survivor became a guardian of others' testimony, responsible for how the history is preserved.