

SURVIVING

How Religious Holocaust Survivors Cope with their Trauma

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Based on an in-depth study of four survivor interviews this article traces the ways in which a traditional Jewish upbringing contributes toward fostering the development of a personality type that is able to mobilize specific coping mechanisms and to marshal a special resilience when the person is faced with severe persecution. It also looks at how these religious coping mechanisms and strategies hold up after the war and, most acutely, when these survivors are faced with the challenges of old age. Recommendations are given to helping professionals on how to provide supportive interventions to aging religious Holocaust survivors.

My interest in the coping abilities of religious survivors was awakened many years ago when I came across a statement by Jean Amery (1980), a survivor of Auschwitz. He said that those camp inmates who were religious seemed better equipped to ward off the cruelty of their persecutors than their non-religious fellow inmates, especially intellectuals like himself, who are sometimes consumed by resentments even later in their lives. Both his observation about his religious fellow inmates and his statement about his own resentments provoked questions: How were religious camp inmates still able to relate to G-d when they were faced with situations that might have looked like G-d was abandoning them? How did their holding on to religious practice help them cope with the terror of the camps? And what role did their religion play when they were faced with the challenge of rebuilding their lives while struggling at the same time with their own feelings of anger, guilt, and grief relating to their Holocaust experiences? How would old age affect this dynamic?

In my search for answers to these questions, I began with an in-depth study of four survivor interviews conducted under the aus-

pices of "The Transcending Trauma Project" at the Penn Council for Relationships in Philadelphia. I focused first on the ways in which a traditional Jewish upbringing might contribute toward a special resilience that comes to the fore when a person is faced with severe persecution. Then I looked at how these formative childhood influences resonated in the survivors' coping abilities as they reacted to their traumatic experiences during the Holocaust. I explored how grief, guilt, and anger surface in the post-war phase of their lives, assessing whether the expression of these feelings might be tempered by the commitment to Jewish religious life. Finally, I wanted to find out whether the religious coping skills acquired in response to persecution would hold up in old age.

The four survivors, two men and two women, were all the sole survivors of their families, and they all survived on their own, i.e., without supportive interaction with any member of their nuclear family. The two men were married before the war. Both lost their wives; one of the men also lost his two children. The four survivors were also in Auschwitz for less than a year, and three of them were incarcerated in forced labor camps in Poland and Germany. At the time of the interviews the women were in their late sixties, and the men were in their mid- to late eighties.

An earlier version of this article was presented at "A Time to Heal: Caring for the Aging Holocaust Survivor," A Multidisciplinary Conference at Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care, Toronto, Canada, May 4-7, 1999.

MAINSPRINGS OF SPECIAL RESILIENCE

In all four cases, special resilience was gained from a religious upbringing that took place in the context of nurturing family relationships. However, the nurturing person need not have been a parent, as the case of Baila I. shows. Her mother was very absorbed in taking care of her younger siblings and helping her husband run a grocery store. Baila's grandmother stepped in and was able to provide the nurturing that her overburdened mother was not able to give her. Baila remembers staying overnight often in her grandmother's house and sharing her bed not only "to keep each other warm" but also "because I admired her, the way she was very well learned in Yiddish and Hebrew." Her grandmother used to come every morning to their house with the special mission of praying with her and her siblings and teaching them *mitzvot* (commandments). If she had not done that, the girls would not have learned much about Jewish religious practice, because there was no Jewish girls' school in this town in Eastern Slovakia.

Three of the survivors reported that in the course of humiliating camp routines or other distressing and anxiety-provoking incidents they remembered certain things that a close family member had told them when they were children. Hansi B. remembered her father telling her to have *emunah* (faith), to trust in Hashem, and to pray for help. Her father had raised her consistently with these messages, and when she was separated from her parents during the Holocaust they continued encouraging her through letters sent to her while she was hiding in Belgium.

The development of resilience can also be attributed to the self-discipline fostered as a result of being raised as observant Jews. An example is the discipline they displayed in relation to food. Three of the survivors explicitly stated that they fasted on Yom Kippur. In the case of Baila, fasting saved her life. One year, during the war, she had food poisoning the day before Yom Kippur. Because of the religious requirement to fast on

Yom Kippur, she withstood the temptation to eat and thus was able to let herself heal. Similarly, after liberation she refrained from eating too much because she knew this was what one had to do after fasting. It served her well, while others got sick or died from over-eating.

Religious Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Seven religious coping mechanisms and strategies were employed by the four survivors. In each case I give an example to illustrate the connection between the specific coping mechanism/strategy and the formative childhood experience.

1. *Seeking attachment to G-d through prayer and the performance of mitzvot to the extent possible under dire circumstances:* Baila reports that the morning ritual hand-washing before saying the morning prayers and eating her slice of bread helped her start her day in a positive way in the face of humiliating camp routines. In addition to reminding her of her connection to G-d, the ritual hand-washing and the morning prayers conjured up for her the memory of her maternal grandmother who had taught these *mitzvot* to her. No doubt, the memory of her beloved grandmother had a strengthening effect on her. Clinging stubbornly to this morning ritual helped Baila counter the absurd and dehumanizing reality of the camp by reaffirming the counter-reality of *mitzvot* that was expressive of her past.
2. *Actively engaging their reality in order to understand it as a means of keeping their sanity and counseling others:* In his function as a rabbi, it was Rabbi L.'s task in the Lodz Ghetto to answer people's questions. These questions ranged from kashrut to complicated ethical issues regarding conduct under circumstances beyond the ordinary range of human experience. Naturally he had to make sense of his own reality and the reality of others in such an extraordinary context. In the

absence of appropriate books, he had to consult from memory the sources he had absorbed in early childhood and during his studies in various Yeshivot. Based on his talmudic knowledge he was able to reject as unacceptable by the standards of Jewish law Chaim Rumkowski's¹ willingness to choose certain people for deportation in order to save others. He was able to delineate how Rumkowski had abandoned Jewish values and instead was drawn into complicity with the Germans. Using halachic sources to sort out reality, Rabbi L. helped fortify his psyche against any attempt to identify with the aggressor and thereby managed to maintain his sanity.

3. *Making decisions that are informed by Jewish religious values and beliefs absorbed during their childhood:* When Abraham S. and his wife were faced with deportation to Auschwitz, he was given the option of instead going to a labor camp. Although many men abandoned their wives in the hope of increasing their chances to save themselves, he decided otherwise. He told his wife, "I didn't grab you from somewhere in the woods. I married you because I like you. Wherever you go, I go." And so they were deported together to Auschwitz. In this case Abraham resolved his dilemma by reaffirming his marital bond in the face of death in accordance with the strong rabbinic affirmation of marriage. He expressed his unconditional loyalty to his wife by paraphrasing the biblical Ruth: "Wherever you go, I go!"
4. *Performing acts of kindness (chesed):* Under extremely frightening circumstances when the "Kinderheim"² was evacuated by German soldiers and all the

children had to be loaded onto a truck, Hansi, who functioned as an assistant teacher, pulled herself together and gave a little speech to the children telling them that they should "trust in Hashem." In this case Hansi felt compelled to pass on the messages that her parents had sent to her in their letters to her when she was on her own in Belgium.

5. *Telling tales of the good Jewish life:* Hansi remembers conversations in Auschwitz about "Jewish things." People learned and prayed together. They also talked about "the most delicious recipes they made in their homes" and "what a wonderful family they came from, or what wonderful things they all had. And their parents, and their brothers and sisters." Even though she calls herself "a little timid," she nevertheless joined the conversations and songs.
6. *Faith in G-d and believing that G-d has chosen them to survive:* Although Hansi firmly believes that G-d guided her in making her life-saving decisions, she emphasizes that she felt compelled to make her own contribution by being as actively involved as possible. "You tried to help yourself. This, I guess, was Hashem's guiding." As long as she did her best, she felt that G-d helped her. "Hashem gives you a certain strength. You had to do it, that's all."
7. *Praying with special religious fervor for the advent of the messianic age (Yemot Hamashiach):* Baila reports that her mother told her and her siblings that the Moshiach would come as soon as the Jews would be worthy: "If everybody is going to have their faith and do as the commandments say, then he'll come. There were songs about it... When I walked in Auschwitz and I saw the tefillin, and the siddurs and everything all over the streets... When we went from the cattle car to the barracks so I figured, 'Well, this is now Moshiach's tzeiten, Moshiach's times. Moshiach is going to come for sure, because this is not normal.'"

¹Chaim Rumkowski was appointed by the Germans as head of the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) of the Lodz Ghetto after he had volunteered for this position.

²A home for children whose parents were not able to take care of them due to Nazi persecutions.

POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTIONS: RELIGION AND THE LEGACY OF TRAUMA

In the survivors' postwar lives, when they were faced with the challenges of adjustment to a new country and raising families, their religious coping abilities held up very well, even when renewed trauma struck, as the case of Abraham S. shows. Abraham S. lost his four-year-old son to a brain tumor about eight years after his liberation. Considering that this man had lost his wife, his twin daughters, and his whole family of origin in the Holocaust, a blow like this could surely be the cause for a lifelong melancholia. In spite of everything though, he says that he has a hopeful outlook on life: "G-d will help. And thank G-d, He helped me, I'm well, and not sick, and I'm still alive." And he sums this up in more general terms: "Everything what a person goes through is, thank G-d. Even if you don't believe, you also say 'Thank G-d.'"

All four survivors in this study were able to find marriage partners shortly after the war, and they raised children as devoted observant Jews. In fact, teaming up with their mates helped them considerably in sharing and integrating their grief. Clearly, they were looking for familiarity when choosing their mates. "Familiarity" in this context needs to be viewed slightly differently from the way the term is used traditionally in psychology. In that context, the search for familiarity has the connotation of regressing for the sake of avoiding something new, out of the fear of the unknown, i.e., of getting stuck in some type of fruitless nostalgia. In contrast to this view, when religious survivors were looking for familiarity, they were aiming to revive emotional attachments to family members whom they lost in the Holocaust. For example, Baila explained that when she married her husband she felt protected anew—as if her husband were her father. In addition, these survivors were looking for someone with whom they could bond to carry out a mission that was inspired by their survival; that is, someone who had the qualifications to embark on the joint project of living in accordance with their

religious obligation to fulfill *mitzvot*. While busily rebuilding their lives, the memory of their loved ones was by no means forgotten. Rather than cutting themselves off from their mournful feelings, these survivors grieve in small increments. Grief is not allowed to take over, because a life in accordance with their religious values has its special demands—one has to keep very busy responding to these demands.

Feelings of guilt do come up, but it seems that the religious outlook holds them at bay. Jewish law clearly states that saving one's life has priority—*chayecha kodmim*, one is entitled to this priority. This seems to preclude preoccupation with self-accusations, since the halachic view assigns priority to preserving one's own life and thereby helps instill a respect for human limits.

Themes of rage and anger against the aggressor and G-d are hardly mentioned in these interviews. Two factors seem to account for their absence. First, Jewish tradition discourages the overt expression of anger. It rather helps the individual to delegate feelings of this sort, such as the desire to seek vengeance, to G-d. Such delegation unburdens the individual because he or she believes that evildoers will be brought to justice by G-d. Second, whenever these survivors were probed for angry feelings toward G-d, they countered with something like this: "Look at my *naches*, how satisfied I am with the course of my life since the Holocaust. I count my blessings."

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TRAUMA AND RELIGION

In contrast to findings derived from my analysis of these four survivor interviews, psychoanalysts have been generally dismissive of the role of religion in survival and recovery. Henry Krystal (1981), for example, views religious practice merely as a defensive mechanism against potentially overwhelming rage and mournful feelings. From this perspective, "yearning for the comfort of religion serves survivors as an escape route that forestalls their having to deal with their nega-

tive emotions. It merely fosters externalization in the form of piling up of rituals" (1981, p. 185).

However, my findings indicate that ritualized forms of mourning ensure that these feelings do not get cut off, but rather provide space for their expression in manageable proportions so that they can be integrated systematically into the survivors' present lives. In fact, commemorations in the form of Yartzheit and Yizkor services encourage the expression of grief in a communal setting, thereby providing the survivor ongoing group support, and are at the same time a testimonial to the vibrant continuity of Jewish life.

From a psychological perspective, how is one to make sense of some survivors' assertions that their commitment to religious practice is unshaken by their Holocaust experience? What fuels their commitment, and what can account for the continual use of the religious coping methods acquired during their traumatic experiences? I found the conceptualization of trauma grounded in an object relations perspective proposed by Auerhahn and Laub (1989) to be a useful framework as it allows for an integration of the religious dimension.³ "At its most extreme, trauma (inflicted by other human beings) results in complete severing of the link between self and other." The focus in this definition is not on the "quantity of impact" but rather on its "structure-destroying properties" (J. Cohen, as quoted by Auerhahn & Laub, 1987). The perpetrator's assault (in the worst case) results in annihilating the victim's "good objects," his or her internalization of "good-enough mothering" (D. W. Winnicott's phrase) as well as paternal nurturance and guidance. Deprived of a protective shield, the victim is thrust into a

state of primary ambivalence that renders him or her vulnerable to bonding and identifying with the aggressor in order to combat an unbearable inner void.

I suggest that religion functions as a protective shield in its own right in that it reinforces the victim's primordial relationship with his or her internalized "good objects." Three survivors presented in this study describe in detail how they imbibed religious teachings and attitudes in the context of parental (or 'grandparental') nurturance during their childhood. Consequently, when their lives were threatened and when they were all alone and isolated, religious practice and vocabulary enabled them to reconnect with their internalized sense of parental nurturance. Hansi reports how her father wrote in his letters to her in her Belgian exile that she "should trust in Hashem and things will be all right." Since Hansi did not remember the prayers from the siddur by heart she resorted to a personalized way of talking to G-d. "But very often I said Sh'ma... whenever you felt close to death, you say Sh'ma... Very often I said it. I thought, 'That's it! That's it! I better say Sh'ma.'" Similarly Baila describes how she combatted the humiliating camp routine by performing the ritual hand-washing in the morning before saying her prayers and eating her slice of bread—a *mitzvah* taught to her by her grandmother.

What accounts for the absence of recrimination against G-d when things did not turn out all right after the war? As mentioned earlier, an accusatory tone toward G-d is entirely missing in all these interviews. Hansi says that it does not occur to her to hold G-d accountable for what had happened. This position is very evident in Abraham S.'s interview. He reports that he and his fellow inmates were asking each other in the camp, "Where is G-d? He sees such *tsuris*?" And when the Germans were making fun of him and his fellow believers he was thinking, "He (the German) can do to me whatever he wants, and G-d doesn't help me." His response to the Holocaust for the rest of his life has been to avoid asking questions regarding

³ For an affirmative analysis of the role of religion in enabling the troubled religious patient to come to grips with the psychodynamics of his or her situation see Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1996), *Psychoanalytic treatment and the religious person*. In Shafranske, Edward (Ed.), (1996) *Religion and the clinical practice of psychology* (pp. 409-431). Washington, DC.

G-d's involvement. He has no objections to following directives issued by the "big rebbes of Jerusalem" (Gedolim), who were beleaguered with questions by survivors about G-d's role in the Holocaust after the war. The Gedolim recommended to take these questions off the table because "G-d is G-d, and that's all." Abraham continued: "What can I tell you? I go to synagogue, and I say *Sh'ma Yisroel*, and I believe. Everything what a person goes through is "thank G-d"... This is a style of living. That's all."

Abraham S.'s position with its agnostic overtones seems in stark contrast to that of the other three survivors, who all emphasize how G-d helped and directed them throughout their Holocaust ordeals. In fact, they partially attribute their continuously strong belief in G-d after the Holocaust to what they view as G-d's intervention on their behalf. What appears at first sight as a strong discrepancy between Abraham S.'s view and those of the other three survivors can be reconciled by viewing Abraham's position against the backdrop of the traditional teachings of rabbinic Judaism. These teachings generate what Max Kaddushin (1972, p. 301) has called a "normal mysticism." Because of His radical uniqueness and oneness, G-d remains totally conceptually and existentially inaccessible to us on a literal level, and yet Judaism with its multiple commandments has woven a whole way of life around G-d's very "absence." The unbridgeable distance between us and G-d—what the rabbis call *klal lo yasiguhu* (no human concept can ever penetrate His Essence)—has devolved into rabbinically prescribed ways of doing things that penetrate into almost all areas of life. In a crucial sense, Judaism normalizes G-d's "absence" (Botwinick, 1997). It is incumbent upon us as helping professionals in relating to religious survivors to reserve judgment and to enhance our ability to listen. At the same time we should strive to deepen our understanding of Jewish tradition so as to enable the survivors' responses to achieve maximum coherence in relation to it.

Halachic prescriptions circumscribing the

recitation of "Sh'ma Yisroel" illustrate Judaism's normalization of G-d's "absence." The Sh'ma is one of the first prayers that Jewish children learn. Primary emphasis is placed on how this prayer is recited: One's ears have to hear what one's mouth is saying. The praying person has to recite the words with utmost concentration. In order to ensure that every word is understood fully, the Sh'ma can even be recited in a person's mother tongue. The first verse of the Sh'ma affirms the unity of G-d (*achdut Hashem*). The halachic prescriptions focus on the individual's own self-enactment in readying him- or herself to assume a prayerful stance. Rather than promising a mystical communion with the Divine, rabbinic Judaism emphasizes the centrality of the action of performing this mitzvah itself (Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah*). What really matters is that we reach deeply into ourselves and impress upon ourselves that G-d's oneness is incomparable to any human expression of uniqueness or oneness. All that remains for us is to control our own actions when it comes to getting ourselves ready to pray.

The radical emphasis on self-enactment and human freedom and responsibility in rabbinic Judaism seems to have distinct psychological utilities for Holocaust victims. Through the performance of *mitzvot* the individual can experience a satisfying sense of control and reassurance by exercising his or her faculties of the mind on a regular basis. The mere act of concentration while reflecting on one's limitations in relation to G-d may have the potential side effect of diminishing burdensome feelings of resentment, anger, and fear. At the same time, the prayerful stance may conjure up the context of early childhood religious upbringing, which enables the individual to connect on an unconscious plane to images of parental nurturance. A dispassionate investigator might very well identify praying (as exemplified here by the recitation of "Sh'ma Yisroel") and the act of preparing for it as valuable techniques for holding negative feelings at bay. It is the radical focus on the "here and now" integral

to the performance of *mitzvot* on a daily basis that serves to strengthen the survivor's coping abilities.⁴

AGING AFTER SURVIVING: A PERSPECTIVE FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

How do the religious survivors' coping abilities hold up in old age when losses occur again and when the stability regained during most of their adult lives is threatened by not being able to perform one's usual duties and *mitzvot* due to frailty and illness? An important factor in the survivors' speedy recovery was the closeness they experienced in their marital relationships and the way that these relationships reconnected them emotionally with their families of origin. But what if a marriage partner dies?

Baila describes the impact of her husband's death: "When I lost him... I felt like a little girl, like when I lost my parents." After her husband's death she was so distressed that she literally "was tearing the hair out of (her) head." Baila was able to bounce back because her children took turns keeping her company 24 hours a day for the first four weeks. After that her son stepped in by keeping her busy with errands for the family company. In the years that followed, Baila took on the task of supporting religious education. She does this not only by her financial contributions in the name of her deceased husband but also by going out to the schools and talking about her experience surviving the Holocaust. But what if children choose not to be involved so closely with the remaining parent out of the fear that the parent will make too many demands on them?

Another factor that portends danger in the lives of aging religious survivors is that their

memories of the Holocaust become more intrusive as the distractions of their regular adult preoccupations recede into the background and defenses weaken.⁵

Rabbi L. says that he was able to sleep when he endured life in the Lodz Ghetto, but that today in his late eighties he is no longer able to sleep. His wife, in her own interview, reports that her husband—who always had a sense of humor and was able to turn a bad mood around to "make you lustig in di oigen"—in "the last two, three years he went down under this terrible burden of *churban* (disaster, Holocaust)."

It is alarming to consider that even religious survivors may not be fortified enough to withstand the onslaught of invasive post-traumatic memories as they confront a state of increased vulnerability due to frailty and illness (Auerhahn & Laub, 1987). The disturbing possibility that the burden of the Holocaust can overshadow the satisfactions gleaned from a well-lived religious life should inspire us to think about mobilizing interventions that reinforce the survivors' familiar coping patterns; for example, their and their caregivers' continued efforts to fulfill their mission of doing *mitzvot*. For the religious survivors in this study the performance of *mitzvot* was indeed integral to their identity as survivors. They survived under the most extreme of circumstances because of and through their performance of *mitzvot*. To have this ability jeopardized in their old age as a result of their diminished capacity for action shakes the core of their identity of who and where they are in the world. There seems to be a danger that religious survivors will be engulfed by feelings of guilt, depression, and inadequacy in relation to their reduced abilities to do *mitzvot*. Where these limitations set in, we as helping professionals need to intervene to extend the survivors' frontiers of possibility as much as we humanly can. Since *mitzvot* encompass all aspects of a person's

⁴Recent research on religion and psychology seems to corroborate my thesis even though its focus is not recovery after massive (man-made) trauma. See for example, K. I. Pargament (1997), *Religious methods of coping: resources for the conservation and transformation of significance*. In Shafranske, Edward and K. I. Pargament, *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York, Guilford, 1997.

⁵See for example the articles by Henry Krystal and others in *The Aging Survivor of the Holocaust*, *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 1981, Vol. 14, No. 2.

being, aiding religious survivors to perform them means helping them in all facets of life. Examples include being driven to a synagogue to pray with a minyan; help in preparations for Shabbat; household help in cleaning and reordering the house for Pesach; and help in purchasing the religious artifacts integral to the observance of Pesach, Sukkot and other holidays.

Interventions of this sort address what is of utmost importance to religious survivors and make them feel genuinely understood and respected at the core of their being. These interventions will prepare the ground for building a good and trusting alliance between survivors and their helpers, so that eventually the door is opened for further supportive interventions, such as enabling them to unburden themselves of intrusive post-traumatic memories and sharing their grief. The stage would thereby be set for reconnecting with the untainted, nurturing memories of their early childhood.⁶

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The interviews upon which this study is based were provided courtesy of "The Transcending Trauma Project," Philadelphia. Bea Hollander-Goldfein, Ph.D., director. Special thanks to Norman Garfield, Jennie Goldenberg and Leila Verman who conducted the interviews.

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⁶For illuminating discussions of how to conduct psychotherapy with Holocaust survivors see: Auerhahn and Laub, "Annihilation and Restoration"; and: Dori Laub, Nanette C. Auerhahn and Harvey Peskin, "Psychotherapy with Holocaust Survivors," *Psychotherapy*, Vol. 30, pp. 434-442.