

Lechem Hara (bad bread), Lechem Tov (good bread):

Survival and Sacrifice during the Holocaust

by

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and

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Abstract

In Judaism, human nature is understood as existing on a spectrum between yetzer hara (evil inclination) and yetzer tov (good inclination). Jews struggle to suppress the yetzer hara and exercise the yetzer tov. Based on an oral history interview and co-created by a survivor of the Holocaust and a researcher, this story focuses on bread (lechem) and hunger in a Polish ghetto. The narrative encourages reflection about good and evil and about the tangled intermingling of the generosity of self-sacrifice and the instinctive drive for survival.

I meet Jerry, a Polish survivor of the Holocaust, at the Florida Holocaust Museum to talk about writing stories together. He and I have been conversing regularly since I first interviewed him in March 2009. As it is almost lunch time, I have picked up two sandwiches and a large Caesar salad. “Oh, I can’t eat bread,” Jerry says, pointing to the turkey wraps I have placed on the table. “The food is chametz. Do you know what that means?” I shake my head. “It means it is not kosher for Passover.”

“I am so sorry, Jerry,” I say. “I forgot it was Passover. I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s okay,” Jerry replies. “I can eat the salad. Time was I’d eat everything on the table no matter what it was, but not now.”

After we finish eating, I say, “Tell me again the story about smelling the bread when you were in the ghetto in Bodzentyn after being resettled from Plock.”

Jerry nods, takes a deep breath, and begins.

“Oh no, here it comes again. That smell—an earthy aroma. Fresh baked bread from the bakery around the corner. I can see it; it is round, with a deep brown color. I dream of biting into it—first the firm and crisp outside, then the soft and doughy inside, all blend with my saliva to produce a subtle and sweet dark-chocolate, coffee flavor. The smell becomes part of the taste. I dream I am chewing heartily. The bread melts in my mouth and then I swallow. Quickly I bite off another hunk, pull the large loaf away from my teeth, and chew some more. Craving that bread more than I have ever craved anything in my life, I am like an addict needing a fix.

We are silent. The four of us—my mother, two sisters, and I—gasp slightly, pull in our breaths, and let our eyes meet for a moment before we look away, embarrassed by our hunger. We have no mirrors, but we know how we look from seeing the faces and postures of each other.

My sister, a typhus survivor devastated by the disease, moves away from the window and begins to circle the bed where the rest of us sit. Pacing, she is always pacing—first to the outhouse behind our building, a walk she can barely manage, then to the window that looks out onto the empty street. I wonder why she never sits with us on the bed. At that moment, I raise my skin and bones buttocks off the bed and realize how much the side railing is digging into my body. The bed—it's hardly a bed. A frame, made of inch-wide pieces of wood, holds slats together that are covered with straw and burlap sacks. The makeshift burlap sheets soon disintegrate and the straw settles quickly, eliminating any cushion. Now to rest on the bed means to sit on narrow pieces of wood railing. To relieve the pain, I periodically stand up and rub the imprint the railing has made on my buttocks.

I look at my sister's emaciated body. Though we all are thin, she is the thinnest. Her skin hangs; she has no fat or softness to her body. Her limbs look like toothpicks. Her knee and elbow joints and her jaw bone protrude; her face is sunken, and sometimes I think I see the outline of her skeletal frame and skull. At that moment, I realize that she can't sit on the bed because the rail hurts her bones, more even than it hurts mine.

As I watch, my sister moves to the cubicle in the corner, where she stares at the faucet that grudgingly spits out dirty, smelly putrid water. Then she moves back to the window, her body transfixed as if her own lost universe. As long as she is alive, she wants to see something, anything, even the vacated menacing street. That is better than the emptiness of the twenty by twelve gutted storefront, formerly a tailor shop, that imprisons us now. Watching is all that keeps her alive. Wondering what will come into view helps her maintain a glimmer of hope that today the rampaging gendarmes won't kill too many people. Unfortunately she is wrong; the odds of avoiding a carnage are slim.

Another waft of bread. Oh this is the worst. The smell fills every crevice of my brain so that I cannot think of anything else. I will wonder later why we craved only bread, only black bread, not the delicious cakes my mother used to bake, or the beautiful soups, like the chicken and matzo ball. But here today I cannot think of that, of the panorama of rolls and cake and also butter and cheese and all these things we had in our lives in our town where we were born and raised. Then bread was plentiful; now it is only a mirage. Only the smell of the bread gets through my consciousness and when it does, I fight a losing battle against the pain of the memories it brings and the empty knot I feel in my stomach.

I try not to stare at the agony on my mother's face--the set of her jaw, the lack of light in her eyes, her hanging head—but it's hard to ignore. If she too feels hopeless, where does that leave me, a fourteen-year-old boy? I count on her for guidance and assurance. Looking out of the corner of my eye, I am shocked to see that my mother is almost as small as my sister. She was always frail, barely weighing one hundred pounds, and now she weighs much less. As long as I can remember, her varicose veins made moving around painful; now her condition is worse. Always in my memory, she was beautiful; now it's hard to recognize her except for her hair, which to me has always been grey and fragrant.

My mother is in charge of the daily soup for our family. She takes our earthenware pitcher, our prized possession, the biggest we could find, and rushes to the communal soup kitchen to claim the soup for our family of four. Soup? Hardly soup. The best I can say about it is that it is hot. It is supposed to be soup, but it isn't really soup. More like slop—dirty water with a few bits of potato peels, more like what you'd feed to pigs. Today my mother comes back carrying small pieces of stale, dry bread for each of us. My eyes grow big at the sight of the extra treat. But the pleasure is more visual than anything else. The hard crust cannot satisfy our

hunger; it can only remind us, painfully, of the taste and texture we used to enjoy and take for granted.

“I don’t want this soup,” I say.

“Eat, Jerry,” my mom says calmly, handing me my cup of soup and slice of bread. I resist at first, then take both from her hands. The smell of the fresh baked bread wafts through again and I feel nauseous, unable to swallow the piece of cardboard in my hand or drink the filth in my cup.

“Eat,” my mother commands me and my two sisters.

Without speaking, we raise our cups to our mouths. I finish the soup in three quick gulps followed by the bread in two bites. Though the food is tasteless, I want it to last. My sister, the one decimated by typhus, barely swallows. My other sister takes a sip of soup, pauses, bites into the bread, pauses. As though in a trance, she cycles slowly through these motions several times. I vow to follow her lead next time.

Seeing that I am finished, my mother ladles a third of a portion of her soup into my cup, and sets the rest aside for my sisters. She puts one small bite of bread into her mouth, stares at what’s left, and then divides it into three portions and hands it to us. When we ask her why she gives us her food, she offers excuses, different each time. “It’s my stomach.” “My teeth hurt.” “The bread is stale, hard as a rock.” “I don’t like the soup.” I would realize later that the excuses were just that, excuses, so that we would eat her food.

“I don’t want it,” I say defiantly.

“You will eat,” she says simply, and I do. I eat and my sisters eat. Then, staring off into space begins anew.

I stare at the other family living in the same room with us. The mother is a tall woman, almost six feet, and she is there with her husband and daughter, about my age. The mother brings the food, just like my mother, but then she turns her back to her family and gulps down the soup and bread while they sit waiting on their bed. No one says anything, not the father or the daughter. I don't say anything either. But I see what's happening; we all do. In bewilderment, our eyes follow the father as he takes the almost empty pitcher from the mother and spoons what little is left into the mouth of his daughter.

Later this image of my mother starving herself and the other mother hoping to survive makes me want to cry every time I think about it. It has taken me a lifetime to even imagine the burdens Jewish parents had to endure during the Holocaust, a laboratory of suffering from which there was no escape.”

Jerry wipes away his tears. I hold back mine and take his hand, realizing as I do how deeply I have entered his story. “I always think about the food,” he says. “That is how I remember events and what happened—by what we had to eat. When I leave here today, I will remember sitting at this table and eating this lunch you brought.”

“Even though it wasn't kosher?” I ask.

“Even though it wasn't kosher,” Jerry says, smiling.

I think of the brave generosity of self-sacrifice and the instinctive drive for survival experienced during the Holocaust, both forces existing side by side, tangled, mangled, and crushed together. I think of the importance of bread for life, then and now. I gently place the uneaten, non-kosher sandwich in a bag and reverently carry it home.