

Bs”d

The Chapter After When *Gilgulim* of the Holocaust Return

After World War II, the Ponevezher Rav, Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kaheneman, used to visit Miami annually in order to raise funds for his yeshivah. Rabbi Berel Wein, who was a congregational rabbi in Miami during that period, relates this story:

One day the Ponevezher Rav called me and asked me to arrange a meeting in my home with all of the younger couples affiliated with my congregation. I told him that I would do so, but I cautioned him that I did not think that he would raise much money from them. He gently told me that he was not going to speak to them about donations at all.

At that meeting, which was very well attended, the Ponevezher Rav rose and said to them: “My beloved children, the souls of a million and a half Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust are floating in the air above us. Your task is to give those souls bodies to live in.”

April, 1969. New Delhi. I was a 21-year-old American college student who had just spent my junior year in India. With a Pam Am round-the-world ticket in hand, I made my way to the airline office to book my itinerary home.

After an hour’s wait, I took my seat across a desk from a pretty young woman with a long, black braid, wearing a blue and orange batik sari.

I handed her my ticket, and told her: “I want to fly as soon as possible from here to Israel, then to Stockholm, then Paris, then London, then Philadelphia.”

She smiled, and started leafing through a thick tome—the airlines’ scheduled flights. A couple minutes later, she looked up and announced: “Pan Am does not fly directly from New Delhi to Tel Aviv. But you can get a flight at 2 A.M. tonight to Istanbul, and from there fly to Tel Aviv.”

“Fine,” I said amiably.

“Very good,” she said, writing it down. She then started leafing through the tome again. Several minutes later, she looked up and smiled once more. “We have no direct flights from Tel Aviv to Stockholm, but I’ve found you an excellent connection through Frankfurt. You leave Tel Aviv in the morning, you have two and a half hours to change flights in Frankfurt, and you arrive in Stockholm early in the evening.”

“N-N-No, not Frankfurt,” I stammered. “Please find me a different connection.”

Her smile faded as she looked at me quizzically. “But this is the best connection.”

“I don’t want to go to Germany,” I replied firmly.

“It’s just two and a half hours,” she explained. “You won’t even leave the airport.”

I gazed at her. How to tell this young Indian woman, one of a nation 600 million strong, who had resided in their homeland without interruption for at least 3,000 years, that as a Holocaust-obsessed child I had vowed never to set foot in Germany? Not even if I had to go hundreds of miles out of my way to go around it. Not Germany. Not ever.

Hatred of Germany was the passion of my growing up years. Even as a child, I refused to buy any German product, refused to have my picture taken with a German camera, refused to ride in a Volkswagen.

Neither my parents, my brother, nor my friends shared my seething hatred. Born in Camden, New Jersey in 1948, I had no idea where it came from. No one in our family had been exterminated by the Nazis. I didn’t know a single Holocaust survivor, until the Schwartzes moved in around the corner from us, and one hot summer day my brother Joey came home and announced that Mrs. Schwartz had a tattooed number on her arm. I had never seen a Holocaust movie. Indeed, there were no

Holocaust movies to see in the 1950s and early 60s. What was the root of my passionate hatred of everything German?

At the beginning of ninth grade, I had a dream that began to unravel the mystery for me. Everyone in my ninth grade class was required to select a language to study for the next three years. Our choices were: French, Spanish, German, and Latin. All my friends chose French or Spanish. I chose German. When my surprised friends asked me why, I replied with steely eyes, "Know thine enemy.' I want to read *Mein Kampf* in the original."

At the end of my first week of German study, after two classes and a language lab repeating, "Guten tag, Fraulein Hess," I had a convoluted dream. I woke up in the middle of it, shaking. I and everyone else in the dream had been speaking fluent German.

I knew nothing about *gilgulei neshamot* except as jokes about people coming back as animals, but from that dream, I was convinced that I had lived before, in Germany. Perhaps my anger and hatred of Germans was fomented by my own nightmarish experience at their hands.

Seven years later, sitting in the Pam Am office in New Delhi, I looked at the pretty clerk and repeated, "Please find me a different connection. Any country except Germany."

Sighing, she turned pages for a few more minutes. Finally, shaking her head, she announced, "The only other connection I can find for you is through Vienna. It's a seven-hour layover, and it gets you into Stockholm at midnight. Is that all right?"

"That will be fine," I said.

That night I flew out of India. After a week in Israel, I landed in Vienna on a sunny, pleasant spring day. My mood matched the weather. Vienna to me conjured up visions of Strauss waltzes and Viennese pastries. And the seven-hour layover was perfect. I would have time to taste the flavor of the city (and its pastries) and then catch my flight to Stockholm, without having to pay for a hotel.

I took the airport bus into the center of the city, a well-manicured commercial area with fine department stores and outdoor cafes. By now I was a seasoned traveler. During my peregrinations throughout India, I had developed my own approach to getting to know a place and its people. I would go to the residential districts, wander around examining the buildings and their use of space (inspired by my book about how different cultures use space differently), strike up a conversation with the locals, and often be invited inside to experience the family setting. Eager to start my investigation of Vienna, I caught a local bus heading toward one of the residential neighborhoods.

Some twenty minutes later, I picked a stop at random and alighted. In order not to get lost, I decided to cross the street and walk along the bus route, so I could easily retrace my steps to the bus stop going back to town.

At first, I stood there and examined the architecture: flat-fronted, yellowish buildings four stories high with rows of shudderless windows. They were old, but I couldn't tell how old. Certainly before World War II, possibly before World War I.

I walked down the street, pondering what I had learned from my book about the anthropology of space. After a few blocks, I became aware that I was feeling uneasy. The buildings looming above me started to assume a sinister appearance. I came to a corner and crossed the street. As I continued on the other side, I felt a menacing presence issuing from the cross street behind me. I swung around—and saw only an elderly woman walking her dog.

“What’s wrong with you?” I chided myself. “You have almost four hours before you have to be back at the airport. It’s a beautiful day. Calm down and enjoy yourself.”

I took a deep breath and resumed walking, trying to concentrate on a litany of cultural indexes: how the other pedestrians were dressed, the frequency of the litter baskets, the nature of the advertisements on the side of a passing bus. But as soon as I crossed the next side street, my heart started to beat wildly and my palms started to sweat. I felt like I couldn't breathe.

“This is ridiculous,” I told myself. But my feet had already turned around and were carrying me back to the bus stop.

I crossed the side street in the opposite direction. That’s when I heard them—a gang of blond-haired, blue-eyed youths laughing raucously, coming down the side street behind me. I quickened my steps. They were calling to me, following me, gaining on me. I broke out into a run. Sweat drenched my blouse despite the coolness of the day. I could hear them behind me, their laughter now turned to curses and catcalls. A bus passed me and pulled over to the bus stop some twenty meters in front of me. The gang was right behind me, running fast. I sprinted with all my might, and leaped onto the bus just as it started to pull away from the curb.

Only when the bus had closed its door and picked up speed with me safely inside, did I turn around to look. The street was empty.

Rabbi Efim Svirsky is a Jerusalem-based psychotherapist who utilizes a unique psycho-spiritual method he created to help people suffering from phobias and emotional blockages. He employs Deep Relaxation, an altered state of mind in which the patient’s free will is never suspended; the patient is completely aware throughout the process and remembers everything upon returning to day-to-day function.

A Rosh Yeshiva came to Rabbi Svirsky with a strange phobia. He was afraid of showers. He explained that he was not afraid of water; he swam in the sea and in swimming pools, and took baths without fear. But any time he went to take a shower, he was gripped with fear.

Rabbi Svirsky assumed that the Rosh Yeshiva had experienced a trauma involving a shower as a child. So, he led him into a state of Deep Relaxation and asked him to imagine himself in a shower and to feel the fear. “Let’s go back to where this fear started,” Rabbi Svirsky suggested. The Rosh Yeshiva immediately went into a past *gilgul* and saw himself in a gas chamber constructed like a shower. Rabbi Svirsky then took him

through his death, gently coaxing, “As you die, go with the soul.” He saw himself going out of the body into the spiritual realm.

When the session was over, the fear was gone. Notably, this Litvish Rosh Yeshiva was surprised when he came back to the present, because he had never believed that the concept of *gilgulei neshamot* could have applied to him.

During twenty-five years of treating thousands of patients, Rabbi Svirsky has witnessed scores of patients unexpectedly discover the root of their problem in a Holocaust *gilgul*. “Because I’m not a researcher,” maintains Rabbi Svirsky, “it doesn’t matter to me where the patient goes under Deep Relaxation. I have no theories to prove. I have no investment in where the patient goes. But many times it has been back to a Holocaust experience.”

One young woman who came to Rabbi Svirsky for help had an extreme sensitivity around her throat. Even her husband could not touch her there. Under Deep Relaxation, she saw herself as a young girl, and relived an experience where a Nazi officer killed her by choking her to death with his bare hands. Rabbi Svirsky led her through her death to her soul entering the spiritual realm. Afterwards, her neck sensitivity disappeared.

A Russian Jewish woman in Deep Relaxation reported that she was going into the gas chamber. Having succumbed to the Nazis’ carefully crafted plan to break the spirit of their victims, this woman was completely broken as she entered the gas chamber and the doors closed behind her. “They can do whatever they want,” she said, her face betraying deep depression and despair. Suggesting, “Just go out of your body as it goes down on the floor,” Rabbi Svirsky led her through her death into the spiritual realm. At that point, the woman’s face changed, and she broke out into a big smile. Perplexed, Rabbi Svirsky asked her, “Why are you smiling?”

Still in an altered state, she replied, “Over there I had the total feeling that they won. Now I feel like they lost.”

Over the years, in occasional conversations with certain friends, I have disclosed that I feel certain that I perished in the Holocaust. Every single time the friend's response was an admission that she too felt that she had been in the Holocaust. The testimonies below are all from American women who today are religious Jews living in Israel.

Jackie Warshall was born in Brooklyn in 1950 to American-born parents. When she was four years old, at night after her mother tucked her in and left her to go to sleep, little Jackie would stare into her pillow as if it were a TV set, and see a vision. She saw herself inside the back of a truck filled with women. Some of them were collapsing to the floor. Then she saw herself fly out of the truck. There, above the truck, she would feel a sense of liberation, and say, "I got out. I'm free now."

Only decades later did she learn that the Nazis' earliest experiment in mass murder was to pack people into a truck and pipe the carbon monoxide gas from the motor into the back of the truck.

Many years later, Jackie was teaching a fourth grade class in a Jewish day school in Connecticut. In the library, leafing through a Holocaust book for young readers, she found a watercolor sketch of women standing inside the back of a truck. "Standing in the library," Jackie recounts, "I felt like a lightning bolt of recognition hit me."

Anna B. was born in 1957 in St. Louis to a traditional Jewish family with no direct link to the Holocaust. When Anna was five years old, she began to have a recurring dream that she was being tortured in a laboratory setting. Her torturers were a doctor wearing a white coat and, incongruously, a man in a military uniform. She had this recurring dream until she was ten years old.

When she later learned about the Holocaust, Anna felt, "Oh my gosh, the Nazis were the people in my dream." Starting in third grade, she became obsessed with the Holocaust, reading whatever Holocaust books and seeing whatever Holocaust movies were available at that time. At some point, she concluded that she had been experimented upon in Mengele's infamous twin experiments.

Years later, Anna was invited for a Shabbos meal in New York City. When she arrived, an elderly gentleman who was a fellow guest opened the door for her. She looked at him quizzically. She knew him, but she couldn't place from where. He also stared at her with a perplexed recognition. Finally, still standing at the doorway, he said, "I think I know you." Anna replied, "I think I know you, too." Neither of them, however, could figure out from where.

The connection between Anna and this man, many decades older than she, was so strong that the man's wife started to get upset. The man and his wife had been guests in this home many times before. Over Shabbos lunch, however, the elderly man, a Holocaust survivor, revealed something that his hosts had never before heard: He had been a subject in the Mengale twin experiments.

Beth D. was born on Long Island in 1962 to assimilated, American-born parents. As a child, the game of "hide-n-seek" was much more than a game to her. Little Beth felt that it was vital to sequester herself in a hiding place where her playmates could not find her. She would wedge herself into the narrow space between the wall and the furnace, or on the uppermost wooden shelf in the closet under the basement stairs. At other times, she would squish herself above the thick cement heating pipes, which gave her an excellent lookout position, where she could watch her siblings searching for her without being detected. To Beth a good hiding place meant safety, which meant life.

She also felt that strength and endurance were crucial for survival. She had to be the fastest runner. "If I could run fast," she remembers, "I could outrun my enemies, and that meant life."

Beth also had a recurrent nightmare throughout her childhood. She dreamed she was using a latrine where the door had been removed and she was abashedly exposed. There was a guard who stood at the entrance. When she was 28 years old and pregnant with her first daughter, a new set of dreams beset her. She saw herself and her daughter running, escaping from Nazi pursuers. In these dreams, she and the others were speaking Rumanian.

Although most of my friends reported recurring dreams, Tzirel's Holocaust nightmare occurred only once. Born in 1950 in Englewood, California, Tzirel was ten years old when she dreamed that she was lying next to her mother in a huge hole or pit. She looked up and saw a bulldozer at the edge of the pit, dumping dirt on them to cover them up. Tzirel never forgot that nightmare. "It felt so real," she insists, "as if I was reliving it."

Rabbi Z. once told me about an American secular Jewish woman who was taking her first steps toward Jewish observance. She encountered a formidable problem: Whenever she attended a synagogue service and heard the congregants saying, "Shema," she would feel like she was choking and would have to flee the synagogue. She turned for help to a psychiatrist, who recommended instead that she talk to Rabbi Z. Rabbi Z. asked her, "When you hear Shema, where are you?"

"You tell me," she countered, surly.

"Okay," replied Rabbi Z. "You're in the gas chambers."

"How did you know?" was her whispered response.

In his book *Beyond the Ashes*, Yonassan Gershom chronicles cases of strange phobias that occurred to people who were born in America after the Holocaust. For example, two women reported an extreme fear of high black boots. He quotes a letter he received from a woman born in 1948 in North Carolina:

During the early years I was petrified of black boots—the shiny kind that go up to the knees. My grandfather had a rubber pair and I exhibited great fear about those boots. My mother would set them near the wood stove so that I wouldn't touch it and get burned. I never went near the stove because of the boots. I remember going around the perimeter of the room with my back against the wall—to get as far away from those boots as possible. I never understood why I was afraid of the boots until I watched a movie about Hitler

and saw the goose-steppers. There were those boots! I felt then that I had been there.

[Beyond the Ashes, p. 131]

Another woman reported that as a child she was so terrified of tall black boots that her mother would place a pair at the top of the cellar stairs to ensure that her toddler would not approach the stairs.

Interestingly, former Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the youngest survivor of Buchenwald, wrote in his memoir, *Out of the Depths*, that his most vivid memories of the Holocaust could be summed up in three words: trains, dogs, and boots.

Another unusual phobia was reported by a teenager named Joan, who grew up on a Midwestern farm. She had an inexplicable terror of barbed wire. As Gershom writes: "There was nothing in Joan's current life that could account for this fear. ... Nevertheless, every time her father brought home a roll of wire in the pick-up, she would take one look and be filled with absolute terror."

Yonassan Gershom lives in Minnesota, and most of his case studies were *goyim*. This brings up the question of whether a Jewish soul can come to a non-Jewish body. According to Rabbi Efim Svirsky, the Arizal said that if a Jew does not behave as a Jew is supposed to, for example, he converts to Christianity, then Hashem in effect determines, "You want to be Christian? Then you'll be born Christian."

Of course, the Arizal lived in the aftermath of the Spanish Inquisition, where half the Jews of Spain converted to Christianity. Pre-Holocaust Europe, however, presented a different challenge. There, over half of the Jewish population defected from Torah observance in favor of secularism. When those Jews were persecuted and tortured for being Jewish, no doubt many of them wished they were not Jewish.

Witness the case of a middle-aged Chicago housewife who reported a childhood nightmare:

I had my coat on with my yellow star, and I was told to take off my coat. So I took off my coat, and even on my dress I had my yellow

star. I started to go through the line, and they started writing numbers on us. I remember asking my mother, "Why are they doing this to me? But I've been a good girl."

[Later in the dream] ... a soldier came in, and he just said that the children were going to be taken the next day, and we were. We got in a truck and they drove us halfway there, and I remember barbed wire was just about everywhere. And I still didn't know what was going on. This time I was closer to seven [years old]. It didn't really seem like we were there long, but it was too long. ... They had furnaces, I remember there were some furnaces that were in buildings, and they were brick, and they were tying some people down, strapping them down, just sticking them in. They opened up this door of the furnace, and they just started throwing the children in, one after another, and I kept on looking around to see if I could find my brother. I wanted him to hold onto. I couldn't find him anywhere. Soon it came my turn. I kept telling them, "Well, I'll tell you what—I won't be a Jew." I didn't understand what was wrong with being a Jew, but apparently it wasn't good. Didn't help at all.

[Beyond the Ashes, p. 85]

Of course, even religious Jews, when exposed to Nazi torture, may have wished they were not Jewish. The Gemora states the principle: "In the way a person wants to go, in that way he is led." Could those myriads of broken and bitter Jews have returned in non-Jewish bodies? And could this phenomenon account for the unprecedented number of *geirim* in this generation? The Arizal explained that when Jewish souls are born in non-Jewish bodies, they feel foreign and out-of-place in their Christian family. Then they start searching. Either they convert to Judaism, or they do their *tikkun*, and next time they are born as Jews.

This corroborates a feeling I have always had about a good friend, whom I'll call Elana, who was born in Poland in 1951 to a Polish Catholic family. Her father was actually an anti-Semite. Elana, who is intellectual and highly literate, simply never fit in with her family. The family immigrated to the U.S. when Elana was a teenager. Elana was sent to Catholic schools, but she was always different from her peers. As an adult, Elana started searching. Eventually she converted to Judaism and is now married to a rabbi.

Elana is so clearly a Jewish soul. How did she “land” in a Polish Catholic family? I can imagine her in a crowded, horrific boxcar on her way to Auschwitz, deprived of her basic needs and human dignity. Peeking through the cracks and seeing Polish peasants in the field, she could have desired, “I wish I was one of them.” After she was born as “one of them,” she had to undergo the lengthy and arduous process of converting to Judaism so she could become who she innately was: a Jewish soul.

Yonossan Gershom, who interviewed scores of non-Jews who believed, based on dreams, flashbacks, phobias, or hypnotic regressions, that they had died in the Holocaust, writes:

Non-Jews who remember having been Jewish in another life are often disturbed by this fact, feeling that they are somehow “deserters” from their own people—which, in a sense, they are. On some level, even if it was only through being confused after death, ... these souls did choose not to be Jewish anymore.

This does not necessarily mean that they consciously said, “I want to be a blond-haired German.” In some cases they simply wished to be something else besides Jewish, and this desire set the pattern for the next life. After a horrible death at the hands of the Nazis, it probably seemed safer to be born into the dominant culture, without fear of being singled out for persecution. Yet now that these souls are living in a relatively open society where outright persecution is not as likely, they find that Jewish memories are coming back to haunt them.

[Beyond the Ashes, p. 99]

Such a moment-of-death wish explains the remarkable life of Brian Arthur Rish. Born in 1977 in Omaha, Nebraska, to a Roman Catholic mother and a Presbyterian father, Brian did not know a single Jew while he was growing up. At the age of 21, Brian started studying metaphysics and mysticism. One day, he walked into a Barnes and Noble in Columbus, Ohio, and bought a book that delved into six different kinds of mysticism, including Kabbalah.

While studying Kabbalah, he dreamed a dream that was to recur frequently for the next two years. As he later described it:

I was a religious Jew, with a beard and peyos. I was a scribe. I had written out Sifrei Torah and other parchments, like tefillin. I saw myself putting crowns on letters. When I would wake up, I would think, "That's crazy! Why would anyone put crowns on letters?"

Then I would see myself being ushered into a shower room with a whole bunch of other Jews. I knew that the showers were really gas chambers. As I was going into the showers, I was trying to understand why this was happening to me. I had been living a frum life. I had fought to make sure my children married Jews. So at that point I was extremely angry at G-d.

Right as they were about to turn on the showers, I dropped to my knees and said, with as much anger and hatred as I could muster, "G-d, why couldn't you have made me a gentile?"

At the end of 2001, while the dream was still recurring, Brian went to a Jewish chat room online. He started chatting with an Orthodox Jew who called himself, "Bnei Torah." Within three months, Brian abandoned Christianity. Two years later, he started the conversion process through the Chicago Rabbinical Council, the closest Beis Din to Omaha. In 2010, Brian moved to Israel. In November, 2011, he officially converted, taking the name Yitzchak.

What did he take away from his recurring dream of the angry *sofer* who wanted to be a gentile? "I did not believe in past lives," asserts Yitzchak. "The only thing I could really take from the dream is not to turn against G-d. When I turned against G-d, my life got worse. Now I know it's my job to not turn against G-d."

Yitzchak now lives in Yavniel in northern Israel. He is learning to be a *sofer*. And he puts crowns on letters.

Sara Yoheved Rigler is collecting more stories for a possible book on this subject. Readers who have stories alluding to a Holocaust gilgul are invited to send them to the author at info@sararigler.com.