

Choose Life

Category: Bamidbar, Masei, Matos

Eddie Jaku has every reason to be depressed. But he still inspires millions. What is the secret?

Rebuilding Life and Rediscovering Joy

Lately, a new book was released: “The Happiest Man on Earth,” by Eddie Jaku. Eddie is a Holocaust survivor who lives in Sydney, Australia, and has reached the ripe old age of 101.

The book quickly became a best-seller throughout the world and has been translated into many languages. It will become a “must-read” like the book “Night,” by Elie Weisel. It might even be *more* important than “Night,” because this book is much more optimistic. First of all, it was written seventy-five years after the Holocaust, and second of all, the author — as the book’s title attests — is a very optimistic person himself.

Elie Weisel suffered the travails of the Holocaust starting in 1944, when the Nazis arrived in his city in Hungary. Our “Happiest Man on Earth,” on the other hand, was born in Leipzig, Germany and suffered from the Nazis from the very beginning of the war and even earlier — from the day they assumed power in Germany.

When the Nazis took control over the country in 1933, Eddie was almost 13 years old. Until that day, Eddie says, their family identified, first and foremost, as Germans. Second - as Germans too. Their Jewish identity was last. As a child, he believed that he was part of the most cultured and educated society in the world, and he was very proud of it. They were, nonetheless, very culturally Jewish. They attended synagogue, kept a kosher home, and celebrated Shabbat together every Friday night with kiddush and challah.

Everything changed in Eddie’s life as soon as the Nazis came to power. One morning, when he arrived at school, he was told that he could no longer attend because he was a Jew. It was the shock of his life. He couldn’t understand what had gotten into his German friends and what had happened to the German society

which he had been so proud of. This question bothers him until this very day.

I will allow you to read for yourselves the story of his Holocaust experiences, but I want to tell you about his life *after* the war.

By the last day of the war, Eddie was so ill that he was forced to crawl to the main road, where he saw a tank approaching. It was an American tank. The soldiers picked him up, and a week later he found himself in a warm hospital in Germany surrounded by doctors and nurses. He was in terrible shape; whenever the doctor would examine him, he would refuse to tell him his prognosis.

One day, a nurse bent over Eddie to listen to his breathing — to see if he was still alive — and he grabbed her arm. “I will not let go,” he said to her in tears, “until you tell me the honest truth about my situation.”

The nurse told him the truth: the doctor had given him a thirty-five percent chance of survival.

Hearing that, Eddie made a vow: If he would recover, he would never again step foot in Germany, and he would dedicate his life to correcting the ills the Germans had brought to the world.

Six weeks later, he was released from the hospital. He was issued refugee papers, and he traveled to Brussels, Belgium. At the border, the officials didn't want to let him in.

“You are German,” they told him.

“I'm not a German,” he retorted. “I'm a Jew — like the ones Belgium handed over to the Nazis for annihilation — but I have survived and now I intend to enter Belgium.”

It was difficult to argue with that; they let him in and even took care of him and provided him with food.

As time went on, he slowly realized that his entire family had been killed. He felt terribly alone, but he nonetheless resolved to move on and rebuild his life.

In Brussels, he happened to meet his best friend, the person who had helped him survive the worst times in the camps. He lost his friend on the Death March, had

been convinced that this friend had perished, so he was overjoyed when they met. Together, they went to the refugee center where food and staples were being distributed, but when they arrived there, they saw hundreds of people waiting in line.

Eddie turned to his friend and said, "Let's not rely on charity." They went out and found jobs; his friend was a carpenter and he became a mechanical engineer. A week after they found their jobs, they rented a home in the center of Brussels. Several months later, their pictures were featured in the local Jewish newspaper in the column of Holocaust survivors looking for relatives. He soon discovered that his sister was still alive, and slowly, the three of them began to rebuild their lives.

Eddie quickly found a way to fulfill his promise. One day, he read in the newspapers that two Jewish girls had attempted to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. They were both survivors of Auschwitz who had returned to Brussels to discover that their entire families had been murdered. To their good luck, they were saved and taken to a mental hospital.

Eddie and his friend decided that they needed to help. They visited the hospital and they saw that the girls were being held in deplorable conditions along with a third suicidal Jewish girl. He approached the administrator and asked for permission to take them home. "This is no place for them," he said to the administrator. "Let me bring them to my home, and I will take good care of them."

He brought them home and took care of them like they were his own sisters. He brought them to the hospital for sulfur baths to treat their skin which was in terrible condition, and not too long afterwards, they were in a much better mental state. After all, they weren't crazy at all; they had simply undergone unfathomable suffering. In his book, he writes that healing those girls was his way of saying thank you to G-d for keeping him alive. Over time, the girls married and began families of their own.

One day, he had a wild experience while walking through the Brussels central square. As he was minding his own business, he noticed someone wearing an elegant coat which looked quite familiar. A closer look revealed that it was actually his own coat, from before the Holocaust! He followed the fellow into a

coffee shop and accosted him, demanding his coat back. The man said that he was crazy, but Eddie didn't let up. He called over a police officer who forced the fellow to take off the coat and Eddie proved his ownership by identifying the elegant tailoring of the professional tailor in Leipzig, his hometown.

In due time, Eddie met a Jewish woman and got married, but he still didn't find true happiness. He still hadn't recovered his trust in humanity.

But that all changed the moment his first child was born. The first time he held his child, he said, a miracle occurred. His natural joy came back to him, and he promised himself that from that day onward, he would remain a joyful person. He said that marriage and fatherhood were the greatest cure for his sorrow.

How Jews Mourn

We are now in the three weeks when we mourn the destruction of the Temple. Today is Rosh Chodesh Av, when we begin the "nine days" when we do not eat meat, drink wine, or go swimming, all to mourn the two Holy Temples that were destroyed on Tisha B'av.

When we think about how the Jewish people dealt with the destruction, we find something interesting.

But first of all, a little history:

Before the First Temple was built, there was a temporary tabernacle which was erected in Shiloh right after the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel. It stood for 369 years before it was destroyed by the Philistines. In truth, it wasn't totally destroyed; the Ark of the Covenant was taken into captivity, so the People of Israel lost interest in the site and it fell into disrepair. The remnants of the site are still visible today.

Those were the days of the famous prophet Shmuel. Interestingly, we don't find that he made an effort to rebuild the Tabernacle. He focused his efforts on rebuilding the people — he traveled from city to city and raised the spirits of the people who were in a terrible state of mind after the Philistine defeat and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant.

We find a similar attitude after the destruction of the First Temple. Ten years

before the actual destruction, Jerusalem was occupied by the Babylonians and the elite of the people were dragged into captivity — King Yehoyachin, the royal family, the military elite and the spiritual leaders. Some time later, Jeremiah sent them a letter telling them to “build homes, marry and raise families... and seek out the welfare of your city...for their welfare is your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:5). Why? Because they would be staying there for another seventy years.

In simple words, the prophet was telling them — in G-d’s name — not to sit on their suitcases with the hope of returning immediately. They should settle down for a long stay.

We find the same idea once again after the destruction of the Second Temple. Before the Temple was destroyed, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai escaped the besieged Jerusalem and convinced General Vespasian to allow him to reassemble the Sanhedrin in Yavne. Indeed, he was successful in saving and rebuilding Jewish life after the war was over — without a Temple.

The Talmud relates that there were rabbis who refused to eat meat or drink wine after the Temple was destroyed.

Rabbi Yehoshua asked them, “My children, why won’t you eat meat or drink wine?”

They replied: “How could we eat meat which was offered on the altar? How could we drink wine that was offered as sacrament?”

Rabbi Yehoshua didn’t agree. “What about bread which was offered in the mincha-offering? What about fruit which were offered as *bikurim*? What about water which was offered on Sukkot?”

The rabbis didn’t have an answer.

“My children,” he told them, “We cannot avoid mourning entirely, but we cannot mourn excessively either.”

Instead, the sages said, a person should dedicate a small part of his life to mourning. For example, when he builds a new house, he should leave a small portion unfinished.

Essentially, Rabbi Yehoshua taught them that while we remember Jerusalem, we

continue forward. We break the glass at the chupa, but then we celebrate a wedding and establish a new Jewish family. Because Judaism chooses life.

This is true in our day as well.

The Rebbe instituted a custom to study the laws regarding the building of the Temple during the Three Weeks. We don't just mourn the past; we prepare for the future. When Moshiach comes, we will know how to build the Temple. In truth, the study itself hastens the coming of Moshiach.

Good Shabbos.