

Yizkor: We Are Not Statistics

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

Against all odds, in the worst possible situation, an SS officer saved a ten-year old Jewish child—the translator of the machzor in your hands. What lesson can this teach us?

Is It Really So Bad?

After the financial crisis of 2008, I spoke to a congregant who worked in the finance market and who was having a difficult time making a living. The man sounded half defeated. He said: “Listen—the economy is not improving, unemployment rates are still high, the real estate market is in a serious slump, and so people are afraid to invest money in stock...” And the man went on and on.

As much as I tried to find something positive, he was not convinced. He told me, “Just open the newspaper and read the latest statistics—so many people who were considered economic wizards lost everything, millionaires went bankrupt, huge companies went out of business. The situation is tough.”

When I saw that whatever I said didn’t succeed in encouraging him, I said to him: “I want to tell you a story about a Jew I know. His name is Rabbi Nissan Mangel.”

The SS Officer

Rabbi Mangel is a Holocaust survivor. He was born in Czechoslovakia. Around age nine, the Nazis came and took him to the concentration camps. He went from camp to camp—he survived six camps, to be exact. Towards the end of World War II, Rabbi Mangel found himself in Auschwitz. When the Russian Army was approaching Poland, the Nazis decided to not let a single Jew escape their hands, so they decided to transport all their Jewish camp prisoners to Germany—to simply march them by foot from Poland into Germany.

What resulted was what came to be known as the Auschwitz Death March.

It was at the beginning of 1945, in the middle of the winter—the months of

January and February. The cold was frightful. The Nazis marched thousands of people with nothing but thin shirts on their bodies for several weeks, days and nights on end.

Now the path from Poland to Germany goes through tall mountains—and the prisoners were expected to cover this entire distance on foot and in the terrible cold and on the frozen snow. The only thing they could eat was the dirty snow that thousands of people had stepped on.

On top of that, the Germans were very orderly, and so they ordered that everyone—and we're talking about tens of thousands of people—march in one straight single file. And if somebody stepped out of line even a few centimeters, he would be immediately shot.

Along the entire way, there were piles of corpses of people who had been shot or who had simply perished of starvation. And in this march was one ten-year-old Nissan Mangel.

His shoes were too big for his foot size, and in particular, one shoe kept rubbing against his heel, so that every time he took a step in the snow, the shoe would rub against his heel, until it had scraped away the skin and even the flesh of his heel, exposing the bone.

Every single step he took caused him terrible pain, but on this march, he had to walk or die. So he kept on marching. But his foot kept getting worse, to the point that his entire leg began hurting and he lost sensation not just in his heel or foot but in his entire leg.

Now his leg was almost paralyzed. Each step got harder and harder. In those painful moments, he decided that he couldn't take it any more—he simply couldn't bear any more pain without having eaten anything for days.

So he decided that he would step out of line just a bit so that the S.S. men would shoot him and put him out of his misery.

Let's remember that during the Death March, there was a deathly silence throughout. No one said a word. This wasn't because they weren't allowed to talk, but because everyone was concentrating on themselves and on saving their own energy so that they would survive and stand strong. So along the march, tens of

thousands of people marched with no one letting a word out of their mouths.

But suddenly, in those moments when Rabbi Mangel had decided that he couldn't march on any longer, an 18-year-old boy approached him and began talking to him. He asked him where he was from. They discovered that they came from the same town in Czechoslovakia. So Rabbi Mangel told him, "Listen—I can't take any more. I'm ready to step out of line. I'm asking you that after the war, if you manage to be saved and you get back to our town, look for my parents and tell them that I loved them very much but that I just couldn't stand it any more—and tell them which day it happened on so that they'll be able to observe my *yahrzeit*."

The young man heard Rabbi Mangel out, and said to him: "Nissan! You can't do that! Keep fighting! Stand strong and you'll be saved!" So Rabbi Mangel told him, "But I'm in no shape to walk!" So the young man offered to help him walk—he told him to put his two hands on his shoulders and he would walk in front of him and help him walk. And so they went on for another distance.

But this too became very difficult. How long can you walk like that? So again, Rabbi Mangel decided that he couldn't go on any longer—but this time, even the young man who had helped him was in no shape to convince him to stay strong.

And so at that very moment that he was ready to step out of line, an S.S. man suddenly appeared—one of the Nazis who stood guard over the marchers. The Nazi began speaking to Rabbi Mangel in German. Since young Nissan was fluent in German, he was able to have a conversation with him.

The Nazi began asking him personal questions: Where are you from? How many kids are in your family? What was your father's job back home? And so on.

This was not normal at all—the S.S. were the lowest of the low among the Nazis. For the work they did, they recruited prisoners, murderers and criminals—people who saw killing people as a sport. And here, suddenly, one of them is having a friendly conversation with a ten-year-old Jewish boy!

Rabbi Mangel told him that he couldn't move—and asked him to shoot him because he had no hope of going on. But to his surprise, the S.S. soldier told him: You absolutely cannot do that! Force yourself to go on and you'll stand strong, and you'll be saved and even make it back to your town.

So Rabbi Mangel told him, “But I can’t! It’s been weeks already since I ate anything! I have no strength to move! Even my other ‘good’ leg already can’t hold me!”

To his surprise, the S.S. man took out his thermos, opened it and said, “Here! Drink a little coffee and it will give you the strength to go on.” Rabbi Mangel drank some hot sweet coffee and it simply brought him back to life, pouring new strength into him, with the sugar giving him the energy to continue walking.

And so it continued for the course of several hours. This guard kept on appearing, speaking a few sentences to him and giving him a bit of coffee to drink. After a few days, young Nissan complained that his ears were freezing and that he couldn’t go on—and to his surprise, the S.S. man took off his own cap and gave it to him. And so the little boy, the ten-year-old prisoner, put on his captor’s snow hat—and the S.S. soldier marched on bareheaded.

At one of the S.S. man’s “regular” appearances, he started speaking to him again, and Rabbi Mangel already expected him to offer him coffee as he had done until then—but this time, he talked and talked but offered nothing. Rabbi Mangel had already began feeling that he was entitled to the coffee so he asked the Nazi, “What’s with the coffee?” But the guard told him that, unfortunately, even he didn’t get any coffee that day, because the war was getting so bad even for them. The S.S. man even opened his thermos and turned it upside down to show him that it was empty.

Rabbi Mangel told him that he couldn’t go on anymore. So the man told him that in six more kilometers, they’d get to a German town where he’d get him more coffee. But young Nissan complained that he couldn’t walk anymore, so the S.S. man actually put his hand under his arm and helped him walk until they got to the town. The soldier went to some house and reappeared with coffee, but this time, the coffee had no sugar in it, and it didn’t give him the same strength he had usually gotten from the coffee.

Then the Nazi said to him: “Now I have to leave you. Give me back my hat.” Rabbi Mangel returned his hat... and he never saw him again.

Rabbi Nissan Mangel now lives with his wife in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, world headquarters of Chabad, and is the proud father and grandfather of a large family. And the Machzor, the Yom Kippur prayerbooks that

you are now holding in your hands, was translated to English by this Rabbi Mangel.

We Are Not Statistics

Now we can ask the obvious question: What were the chances for a ten-year-old boy to survive such an inferno? Here, six million people were murdered—including one-and-a-half million children. By any statistical odds, this boy had no chance whatsoever of surviving. As a matter of fact, he himself didn't believe he would make it! Yet here he was saved from the Nazi death machine... and by a Nazi!

So now we come back to the economy, and the troubles people go through. Every one of us, no matter what happens to us, must believe that we will succeed. That we will survive. That we will make it. No matter what. No matter what the odds.

For too many of us, it's been a rough year. And we're not quite out of the woods yet.

But to G-d, we are not statistics.

Each and every one of us, my friends, is a beloved child of G-d— and it doesn't matter at all what all the projections and predictions say. We need to believe that G-d will help us, and to get up in the morning and do everything that's in our hands, everything that we can possibly do, to succeed, and G-d will come through. As a matter of fact, if we were to read the newspapers and websites just a little bit less and be a little less demoralized by all the bad news in the world today, it would only do us good.

So as we get ready to go into Yizkor, and from there into a glorious New Year, each and every one of us must remember that it doesn't matter what's happening to everyone else (and I don't mean that one shouldn't care about others). Each and every one of us must believe that he or she can be the one who can have a complete recovery, or succeed in business, and so on.

And if we think in these terms, if we think positively and act positively, with faith and trust in G-d, then with G-d's help it will really turn out that way.