

“Everlasting Words”

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Our Lady of the Elms, Grade 10

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923 words

My brother lies still on his bed. His chest is still rising and falling shakily. His children and grandchildren stand with me around his bed. Quiet prayers flow through each of our breaths. His wife, Gilda, holds his left hand while I hold his right. In your mind, you may now imagine that this is just another old man spending his last moments with those he loves most. Little do you know the life that he led for decades before his inevitable time.

The war had been going on years prior, but it only really struck us when our parents were killed in 1941. In their absence, we had no protection, and we were left to fend for ourselves. But as you probably know, it was not possible to fend for yourself as a Jew in prime Nazi Germany. It was then that Jacob and I got sent to Auschwitz for the first time. I was fourteen, and he was only three years older than me, although he was so much wiser. Every word he spoke, I believed. We were fairly strong in comparison to most who were there, so we were instantly put to work. That night we shared a bed because the cold made our bones ache even more than our muscles, and there was hardly any room with the number of prisoners jammed in the bunks. We were covered in filth, so we couldn't be made any more dirty than we already were by sleeping together. Our hands were sore, and our bodies ached without end or hope of relief. I tried to hold in my sobs, but Jacob could hear me and wrapped his dirtied and bleeding arms around me. I could vaguely hear someone speaking from a few beds away, but it wasn't until Jacob told me to listen closely that I realized what it was. "Be strong and courageous... for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you." The man's voice was gentle as he spoke. "Do you hear that, Aron? God is still with us; I promise you that as long as we keep faith, we'll be alright." I think he could still feel my body tremble with fear because he kept whispering. "Do you remember being in synagogue with Abba and Ima as the Rabbi read this?" I gently nodded my head as the tears dried tightly with the dirt on my cheeks. I remember feeling the words burn as they were etched into my heart. As we lay there listening, I could feel my Ima holding my hand on the left and Jacob always holding my right while the Rabbi spoke. Such comfort could only be imagined in Auschwitz. I don't think the fear would have been quelled if it weren't for Jacob. There is such a weight to the way he speaks that moves people, but more on that later.

We were moved three more times, from Plazow to Mauthausen and eventually back to Auschwitz. This time we were just as thin as the others, and word of freedom was spreading. We were put into a line of Jewish slaves. They gunned down the line one by one, but when we were next, the Nazi's gun jammed. The next thing I knew, Jacob grabbed my wrist, and we ran into the woods. We didn't stop running. Eventually, the race ended: We were in America. We settled ourselves in New York. We didn't know much English, but Jacob still decided to attend Yeshiva University. Only five years after being liberated from Nazi slavery, he became the founder and principal of Hollis Hills Jewish Center. For the rest of his life, all I remember is his teaching until we ended up here, in his room, each breath shakier than the last. Although my words are only a little of his life and I can't fully speak for him, I know he would tell you that nothing meant more to him than teaching his sons Torah. He found it to be such a privilege to give his sons the childhood we never had. I know if he could see all of us now, he would have the same smile he had when in synagogue with our parents. Even though our hands are withered and old, of course what can you expect of two men in their nineties, we still held onto each other tight. The same hand that wiped my tears in that camp is now gently falling to the bed as his last breath makes his chest fall flat. There's no doubt in my mind that he was always meant to be a Rabbi, and there was never even a drop of fear in me when the Nazis took us because I knew when my brother made a promise it would never be broken. And the Nazis would never break us.

So maybe Jacob wasn't your traditional superhero, and maybe you still think he was just some old guy. It doesn't change the impact he made on me and on many. He taught me that strength isn't only from the body but also from the willpower and faith that we keep. When we hold onto faith, no one can take it away from us. He never let what happened to us stop him from doing great things; he turned the hurt into something that helped others believe that things could get better. Most importantly, he always made *me* believe things could get better.

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