



AN APPOINTMENT MADE 80 YEARS AGO

Pictured is Rabbi Israel Becker with Rabbi Lau

One winter night in the mid-1960s, when I was a young teenager, the stage was set for a very important meeting in Israel this past May. Unbeknownst to me, the true genesis for this meeting had begun some 80 years ago.

On that winter night, a man arrived at my childhood home. I had never seen him before, but he was obviously very close to my father, embracing him warmly. As always in my parents' home, he was invited to sit at the table.

The man spoke with my father for a while and presented a book, the *Sefer Rypin*, describing the life and people of my parents' pre-war town in Poland.

The book provided a new world of discovery for me. I saw pictures of relatives I had never seen before, and pictures of relatives, in their youth, who had survived the war. One section had been written by the town's former rabbi, Rabbi Yitzchak Yedidya Frankel, who later became chief rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa and father-in-law of Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, chief rabbi of Israel. A document reproduced in the *Sefer Rypin* naming Rabbi Frankel as the town's rabbi included my father's signature.

Our house was quiet after the man departed. My younger brother was not home at the time, but my mother called my older brother and me close to her. She spoke to us earnestly, explaining that the visitor, Mr. Borenstein, had been my father's brother-in-law, and that my father had lost his first wife, Shaina, and four children in the Holocaust. My mother showed us a photograph of the four children, Rus, Yeshayahu, Yechezkel and Tuvia in the book. They were happy, beautiful children who were murdered in 1942.

My brother and I had previously known nothing of my father's lost family. I felt heavy and guilty hearing this story. I wished I could be a better son. We were told not to discuss this and my father never spoke to us of the man or the meeting.

My mother had participated in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. My father had served in the Polish army and was taken captive in the blitzkrieg. The Germans later freed the captured Polish soldiers, but both my parents were later interned in various German concentration camps. As a Pole, my father was freed. As a Jew, he was imprisoned again.

When the Jews returned to Rypin after the war, they came back to a central location, a large house that had once belonged to my mother's uncle. That's where my parents met.

Poles were killing Jews who returned to the area. My parents moved on to Germany, where my older brother was born. My father wanted to migrate to Israel. He came from a large family of sisters, and all but one, Tante Helen, died in the Holocaust. Tante Helen had immigrated to the United States in the 1920s. Her husband, Uncle Moshe, had emigrated first, working and saving for eight years to bring his family to the United States. Tante Helen sent a letter to my father imploring him to join them. "We are the only ones left in the family. We need to be together," she wrote. This connection with Tante Helen and Uncle Moshe brought our family to America.

When I first studied in Israel, I wanted to identify and connect with surviving relatives and build relationships. All of these people had lost many relatives, and all but one of the cousins I met were from my mother's side of the family. I wanted to know more about who I was and who my parents were.

In 1968, I was able to track down a man named Fishel Blum whose photo had been in the Sefer Rypin. I remember my parents talking about him as a distinguished citizen of Rypin; he became involved in the city government of Bnei Brak, Israel. Fishel Blum, now an old man, told me stories of my paternal grandfather, who was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Later that year, my parents visited Israel for the first time. We reunited with Fishel Blum. When he saw my father with me, he quoted the stirring statement made by Jacob in Bereshis 48:11 when Jacob saw his son Joseph after he was presumed dead for 22 years, "I never dared hope to see you again. But now G-d has even shown me your children."

Also while studying in Israel, I arranged to meet with Rabbi Yitzchak Yedidya Frankel, whose rabbinic document my father had signed in the 1930s. Rabbi Frankel suggested I come to Mincha one Shabbos afternoon when I was staying in Tel Aviv. Initially, he didn't acknowledge me, and I felt uncomfortable approaching him. Suddenly someone whispered, "The Rav wants to see you." I walked home with Rabbi Frankel and he invited me inside. He inquired after my father and showed me the original document my father had signed.

Rabbi Frankel had also written an essay in the Sefer Rypin about the different kinds of Jews there, and how their love and desire for Israel permeated the town. He likened their love of Israel to the splitting of the Red Sea, when the various tribes vied to enter the water. Rabbi Frankel wrote that the Jews of Rypin felt that same enthusiasm about going to Israel.

Esther and I learned of Rabbi Lau's autobiography, "Out of the Depths," as we were researching books for the Southwest Torah Institute's Women's Academy. I was riveted to realize that I was connected to Rabbi Lau through his father-in-law and the family associations to Rypin.

I knew that a meeting with Rabbi Lau would be an inspiring experience for everyone in our Tucson tour group when we visited Israel this May so I called his office in Tel Aviv.

In various e-mail exchanges, I explained to Rabbi Lau that I have been doing outreach in Tucson for 35 years. I shared with him my connection to his father-in-law. I told him that our tour group would be visiting Israel and he graciously agreed to meet with us.

When our group met with Rabbi Lau, he stated that this was a meeting that had been arranged 80 years before. I asked for words of inspiration and strength from the Rav. Some members of our

group were grieving great personal losses and one person was recovering from major medical treatments.

Rabbi Lau mesmerized us with his warmth, eloquence and blend of vast worldly knowledge and penetrating perceptions of Torah. He outlined the potency of Jewish continuity over the centuries, describing the various leaders and cultures of the nations. He illustrated the how Jewish life has survived, while all other cultures have disintegrated, how those nations still may have descendants, but their heritages are not intact. In a brilliant example, he imagined Julius Caesar returning to the Rome airport today. Caesar and modern Italians would be total strangers, both in language and culture. They would have nothing in common. Moshe Rabbeinu, however, returning to the Tel Aviv airport today, could meet an airport worker named Moshe, exchange greetings of “Shalom Aleichem” in the same language, and share the same visions and aspirations. There would be a complete connection between the two men. They would have everything in common.

Rabbi Lau’s example is true of Jewish life the world over. Jewish texts that were written millenia ago are as alive today as when they were first written. Our Torah learning and our culture are alive and thriving.

Rabbi Lau and my parents survived the Holocaust. My father lived a long life. He and my mother married shortly after the war, and were married almost 50 years. They visited us often. My father lived to attend the wedding of his first grandchild, Toba, here in Tucson. Under the chuppah at the wedding, he told my mother, “We won.”

Meeting in Tel Aviv with Rabbi Lau, who emerged as the youngest survivor of Buchenwald to become Chief Rabbi of Israel and influence world leaders, we won again and we continue to win.

Esther Becker will hold a women’s book brunch on Lau’s biography, “Out of the Depths,” on Sunday, Sept. 21. For details, go to tucsontorah.org. or call 747-7780.