

You will be moved by the following story. After reading it, write a short paragraph about the significance of the story in relationship to the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

Last night I attended a bar mitzvah that would have been inspirational at anytime, but for the three-hundred plus who attended in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, it was an amazing, life-affirming experience. I am sharing this story because I believe that many will find comfort from the stories shared with our congregation by a thirteen-year-old boy.

Like many citizens across the nation, my husband and I felt the need to be with people immediately following September 11, and planned to attend the Friday night Shabbat service at the Birmingham Temple of Farmington Hills, Michigan. During the drive, I read from the temple bulletin that a bar mitzvah would be celebrated. I was surprised and hoped it would be postponed, preferring the focus of the evening to be on making sense of the week's events. Tragically, the adult son of a favorite temple friend had been on the ninety-fourth floor of the World Trade Center, and I knew it would be a sad night as we all struggled to digest this personal and national tragedy.

We arrived to find the parking lot filled and the temple crowded. Many apparently felt the need to come together.

The service began with beautiful, mournful music. Then Rabbi Sherwin Wine spoke at length about the horrors of the terrorist attacks. He stated that we had two purposes for being there this night. The first was to mourn the victims, including the son of Skip Rosenthal, Joshua Rosenthal, a fine man who had grown up worshipping at the temple and was well known to many present. The second purpose was to thwart the terrorists' desire to demoralize us by continuing to celebrate life-cycle events, in this case, a bar mitzvah, the "coming of age" of a Jewish boy.

Next, family members of the bar mitzvah boy read passages about milestones, family, dignity, power and peace.

Then Rabbi Wine introduced Jackson, the bar mitzvah boy. At our Humanistic Judaism temple, it is the custom of bar and bat mitzvah students to spend the year prior to their thirteenth birthday researching the life of a Jewish hero or heroine, and apply lessons from their hero's actions to their own life. Tonight, the Rabbi stated, Jackson would be our teacher.

Jackson climbed the box placed behind the podium and faced the packed room, grinning. Proudly he announced that he had chosen to share the story of the life of Solly Gonor. Jackson had read his book, *Light One Candle: A Survivor's Tale from Lithuania to Jerusalem*, about how, as a twelve-year-old boy in Germany, Solly had endured unspeakable hardships to keep himself and his father alive during the Nazi regime. Jackson had managed to locate Solly, now a seventy-four-year-old living in Israel, and began a year-long e-mail correspondence.

Jackson told us how Solly, as a twelve-year-old himself, enjoyed sports and hanging out with friends, when suddenly he was no longer free and was in danger because of his Jewish identity. Solly's family missed a chance to leave the country, and after they were forced from their home, hid briefly with five other families in a barn. In the middle of the night, Solly's father woke them and led them out of the barn just as soldiers arrived. The family watched in horror as everyone in hiding was forced out, forced to dig their own graves, and shot, one by one.

Jackson shared a story about how the Gonor family lived for a period in the Kaunas ghetto, where Solly endured hunger and cold. Solly was bravely able to retrieve food thrown over the ghetto wall by a boy who had been a friend before the war, each risking his life to make a midnight run to the barbed-wire fence when the guards were not looking. Boredom was another hardship, as the Germans banned one of the Jews' last remaining pleasures by ordering the collection and destruction of all books. Knowing he risked his life, Solly and a friend hid books in a forbidden part of the ghetto. Solly grieved when his former math teacher was found with a book and shot. Solly attributes his ability to stay alive in the ghetto to his friendships with two other teens, both of whom later died in concentration camps.

Solly's family was sent from the ghetto to a work camp, and then to a concentration camp. It was there that he was separated from his mother, and promised that he would keep his father alive. Jackson told us about Solly's heart-wrenching experiences at the camp, but also about how Solly used his wits to keep himself and his father fed and clothed.

Finally, the Germans had an idea that the Jewish prisoners would build them a fort, and sent them on a death march through miles of snow-covered roads. Here Solly, in his fatigue, lost track of his father. Eventually, Solly collapsed beside a tree, where he truly believed he would die. He fell asleep. A Japanese American soldier, who awakened him and lifted him out of the snow, told him he was free.

Solly was later reunited with his father, who had been taken to a hospital. Just five years ago, Solly was reunited with the soldier who found him in Israel. This reunion brought back many memories that Solly had long suppressed, and that was when he began to write his book. Jackson stated that he had committed himself to telling Solly's story of courage.

When Jackson finished speaking, the entire congregation stood and loudly applauded his moving presentation. As the clapping finally slowed, Jackson announced that he had one more part to his bar mitzvah. He stated that, "Due to the closing of the airports this week, none of the out-of-towners have been able to come in for this night, except for one. That person is . . . Solly Gonor!" A gasp went through the entire room. Jackson proceeded, "Since Mr. Gonor was not able to celebrate his bar mitzvah when he was thirteen, I would like him to join me now."

A white-haired man in the front row stood and slowly made his way up to the podium next to Jackson. The crowd stood and applauded wildly. For several minutes, Mr. Gonor stood with his hand over his eyes, struggling to regain his composure. Then Jackson and Mr. Gonor read together, first in Hebrew, then in English.

After the reading Mr. Gonor addressed us, stating that he never expected that his experiences would one day be an inspiration to a thirteen-year-old boy. He stated that he was glad he had been able to make the journey from Israel and meet his e-mail pen pal. Mr. Gonor's story reminded us that evil in the world is not new, but that the human spirit and will to survive is strong. At a time when many of us were asking how we could bear the sadness of the days following September 11, we were reminded of those who suffered through years of Nazi cruelty, as well as people in countries all over the world where terrorism is a way of life. We were reminded by thirteen-year-old Jackson that we must, indeed, continue to celebrate life.

Our evening ended by standing together and singing Ayfo Oree. The words, translated from Hebrew, are as follows:

Where is my light? My Light is in me.
Where is my hope? My hope is in me.
Where is my strength? My strength is in me.
And in you.

Caroline Broida Trapp
-from *Chicken Soup for the Soul of America*