



*Parshat Achrei Mot*  
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**In The Wake of San Diego: What Can I Do?**  
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Four words. They are just four words. They make up a simple sentence. But how you *say* this sentence makes all the difference in the world.

What can *I* do? Emphasis on I. Meaning that I am so small, the world is so large. My energy is limited. The problems of the world are unlimited. What can *I* do? Not much. A recipe for contraction.

But then there is: What can I *do*? I cannot do everything. But I can do something. What can I do to make our world a little more decent. A recipe for doing something.

Which way do you say it? Are you a what can *I* do person? Or a what can I *do* person? What life are you living? What life do you want to live?

In the spirit of these questions, and in the week of San Diego and Yom Hashoah, I want to tell you two stories about a man named Rabbi Herschel Schacter who died six years ago at the age of 95. He never said what can *I* do? He made his troubled world a little more decent.

It was April 11, 1945, and General George S. Patton's Third Army was liberating the Buchenwald concentration camp. Rabbi Schacter was then a 28-year old chaplain who ran through the barracks which housed survivors. He would shout in Yiddish, "Peace be upon you, Jews, you are free!" The survivors he saw were emaciated. They had lost their loved ones. They had been through hell. Their world and their lives had been destroyed. Rabbi Schacter did not say what can *I* do? He would remain in Buchenwald for 10 weeks, through April, May and June of 1945, tending to survivors, nursing them back to life, giving them the first matza they had tasted in years, leading Shabbat services in a Nazi rec hall, having Shabbat dinner with them. A

picture of the Shavuot service he led from Buchenwald was on page 1 of the New York Times when he passed away.

On that first day, as Rabbi Schacter made his way around the camp, he saw a small boy, Prisoner 17030, who was hiding. He was terrified. He looked terrified. Rabbi Schacter asked the young boy, in Yiddish, softly, what's your name, my child. The child replied "Lulek." How old are you, Lulek, the rabbi asked?

What difference does it make, asked Lulek, who was 7 at the time. I'm older than you anyway.

Why do you think you are older than me, Rabbi Schacter asked?

Because you cry and laugh like a child, Lulek replied. I have not laughed in a long time, and I don't cry anymore. So which one of us is older?

Rabbi Schacter would go on to help thousands of Jews resettle, including Lulek who resettled in Israel. Lulek would go on to become Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel. Another person that Rabbi Schacter would help resettle was named Elie Wiesel.

After his ten weeks as chaplain in Buchenwald, Rabbi Schacter would go back to America where he served as the rabbi of an Orthodox shul in the Bronx for 52 years.

His time liberating, resurrecting, and resettling the Jews of Buchenwald is well known. But there is an important coda to his life that is not well known.

Roll the film forward 25 years. In the former Soviet Union, Jews faced an era of repression when they could not be Jewish, and they could not freely immigrate to Israel. One day, June 15, 1970, to be exact, 16 Soviet refuseniks planned to steal a small airplane from the Leningrad airport and fly it to Sweden, from which they would then fly to Israel. They never made it into the airplane but were arrested by the KGB on the tarmac.

The group was tried for high treason and convicted. The two ring-leaders, Mark Dymshits and Edward Kuznetsov, were sentenced to death by firing squad, and the other participants received lengthy prison sentences.

Back to Rabbi Schacter. He is a congregational rabbi in the Bronx when he learns that the two leaders of this group are sentenced to death by firing squad because they dream of going to Israel. The notion that Jewish blood would be spilled 25 years after Buchenwald was intolerable to him. He did not say what can *I* do?

Instead, he found a Jewish political supporter of President Nixon, and he pleaded with him to arrange a five-minute audience with the President in the Oval Office. There was a lot of resistance to his getting these five minutes with President Nixon. But he would not be deterred. He would not be denied. Jewish life was at stake. I can do, I must do, something.

Finally, at long last, he gets his five minutes in the Oval Office. He reminds the president that only 25 years ago he was with General Patton's Third Army when America's armed forces liberated Buchenwald, and it is intolerable that Jewish blood be spilled for wanting to immigrate to Israel when there was no lawful way, within the Soviet system, to get to Israel. The President was sympathetic, but he said, what can *I* do? This was a matter of internal Soviet justice, and the Soviet court had spoken. Rabbi Schacter would not be deterred. He pointed to the red telephone on the President's desk that offered direct and immediate access to the Kremlin. Please pick up the phone, Mr. President. It is urgent. It is a moral imperative. Please tell your counterpart that it is intolerable that these Jews be shot to death for wanting to immigrate to Israel.

At last President Nixon promised that he would do something to try to help. Before parting with Rabbi Schacter, he offered Rabbi Schacter a box of Presidential cuff links, which

the rabbi accepted. But after leaving the Oval Office, Rabbi Schacter opened the box of cuff links only to discover that it was empty. It was a box of cuff links without the cuff links in it.

Rabbi Schacter insisted on returning to the Oval Office. He was once again granted a short audience with the President. Mr. President, I cannot help but think of the line from Psalm 146, put not your trust in princes. You were gracious enough to give me a box of cuff links, but there are no cuff links in the box. Mr. President, you were also generous enough to promise that you would do something to try to help those sentenced to death by firing squad because they wanted to go to Israel. I worry that the empty box not portend an empty promise.

The President was apologetic, and gave Rabbi Schacter not only another box of cuff links, with cuff links in the box, but in addition another piece of jewelry with presidential seal for the rabbi's wife. The President also reaffirmed that he would do something to try to help those sentenced to death. In fact, the President asked his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to ask the Soviet government for clemency, which was granted. The death sentence for the two leaders was commuted to a prison term, the prison term for the other defendants was reduced. In 1979, nine years after being arrested, Eduard Kuznetsov was able to immigrate to Israel, where he has lived ever since.

The Buchenwald story is well known. The story of importuning President Nixon is not well known. But it was shared this year, very recently, the Saturday night before Pesach, by his son, Rabbi Jacob Schacter, a teacher at Yeshiva University, at a talk he gave at a shul in Teaneck, New Jersey in honor of his father's sixth yahrtzeit.

What Rabbi Schacter did 74 years ago in Buchenwald still inspires his children and grandchildren. What Rabbi Schacter did 49 years ago in the Oval Office still inspires his children and grandchildren.

That was Rabbi Schacter. What about us? What are we doing that our children and grandchildren will still be inspired by 49 years from now, 74 years from now, because when faced with very big problems in a very broken world we did not say what can *I* do? We said what can I *do*?

Some sermons just ask you to think, to consider some question more deeply. Not this sermon. Not at this time. Not now. This sermon asks you to act. Let me be very particular.

This past week Aliza sent out an email offering three concrete things you could do either in combatting Anti-Semitism, alleviating hunger, or seeing and helping immigrants and refugees. Please do not ignore this moment. Please do not say what can *I* do?

Here is what you can do. You can make our world a little more decent. If one person who hated Jews now sees the light, if one person who was hungry is now fed, if one immigrant or refugee who was homeless and hopeless now has a home and hope because of you, you have made our world a little more decent. You cannot do everything. But you can do something.

In heaven God is not going to say why weren't you like Rabbi Schacter. He was a uniquely compelling human being and rabbi. In heaven God is going to say: were you the best you? The time to answer that question is now. Shabbat shalom.