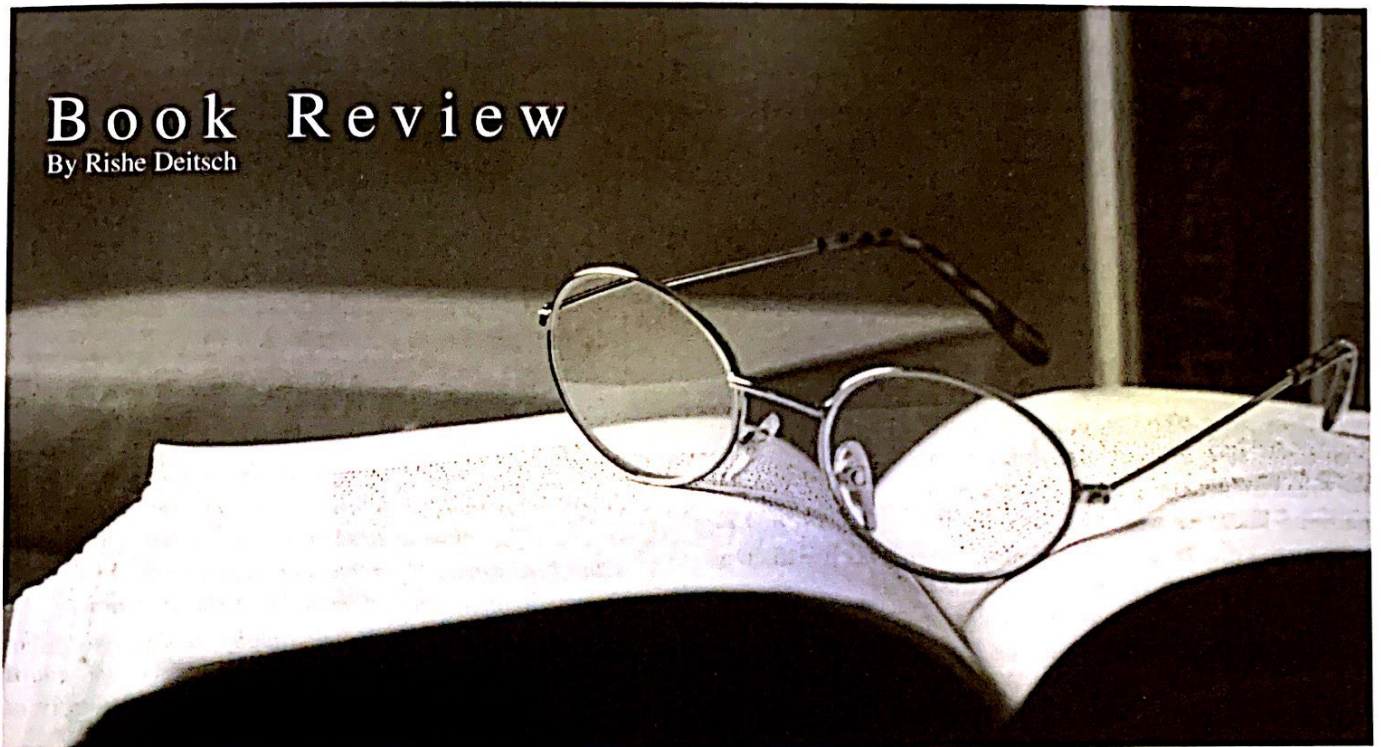


Book Review

By Rische Deitsch



Abiding Hope: Bearing Witness to the Holocaust

By Benjamin A. Samuelson, produced by Mr. Mike Savage and the Greta Savage Memorial Foundation; 287 pages

Talking with this venerable, elderly Jewish author and businessman on the phone (I live in New York, he lives in California), I was struck by his dignity and strength of character. It flowed through the telephone wires as surely as his voice.

Still, you can't compare hearing with seeing. Had my daughter and son-in-law not moved to Thousand Oaks, California, on shlichus, I may have never met Mr. Benjamin A. Samuelson in person. Fortunately, they did and I did, since he lives in Thousand Oaks together with his wife of 47 years, not far from his ka"h three children and six grandchildren.

It was incredible to see him listen patiently to my little granddaughter describing her "jewelry" to him (a collection of pink and white ponytail holders which she wears on her tiny wrists) in shul on Shabbos morning. It was even more incredible to sit with him on a sunny Tuesday afternoon and discuss his book, and look at his pictures, and hear him tell of his experiences. He told several new stories and I often found myself asking, "But that isn't in the book, is it?" Finally, he sighed, smiled, and said that if he had put every-

thing that he had lived through in the book, it would have been a thousand pages longer, and also too painful and difficult for him to relive.

Though he himself left many Jewish practices behind at a young age, Mr. Samuelson feels strongly that the Jews who held fast to their religion even in the camps had an advantage; a certain strength that the others did not. Was it their belief in G-d / in Hashgacha Protis / in the Next World / in the value of a mitzvah / all of the above?

According to Mr. Samuelson, who was 18 and 19 years old in the camps, suicides were a daily event there, but it was never the religious Jews who threw themselves on the electrified barbed wire. "They kept track of the dates, tried to keep the Yomim Tovim. They were *joyful* when they were able to keep a Yom Tov, even in some small way. On Rosh Hashana, they made a minyan in middle of the night. On Yom Kippur, they fasted the twenty-five hours even though they were starving to begin with and could barely move without even a bit of water the whole day. Fasting, davening, reading portions of the Torah aloud by heart, keeping mitzvos, was important to them and gave them a purpose other than survival."

One can't help but be reminded of the conversation that took place between the Frierdiker Rebbe and his interrogator in prison; the brutal interrogator waved his gun at the Frierdiker Rebbe and growled, "This little toy has made many men talk," and the Frierdiker Rebbe replied, "That toy works on men with many gods and only one world. A man

with one G-d and two worlds has nothing to fear from a gun."

Just as many of the emaciated, starving people in the camps fantasized about bread, so too, said Mr. Samuelson, many of the religious Jews imprisoned in the camps dreamed of the opportunity to satisfy their strong cravings for a mitzvah, even at great risk to their very lives. We are not commanded to risk our lives to do most mitzvos—on the contrary, we are commanded to live—and yet the desire was so intense, that some Jews did it anyway. Just as a starving prisoner would sometimes lose his head and run toward the bread truck to grab food, though rationally he knew he would be shot on the spot, so too did the author witness a Jew risk his life to do a mitzvah out of pure yearning. From the book:

...I had been working a few hours when I heard someone call my name, not my number. I ignored the call, focusing my attention on the task in front of me. Besides, I was no longer accustomed to answering to my name. On the other hand, I'd respond immediately anytime I heard my number, always in German, almost always yelled.

"How can I resist when I see tefillin?"

I heard my name again, the voice speaking in Yiddish. "Benjamin, Benjamin Samuelson, is that really you?"

I finally looked up from the clothes in front of me to the speaker on the other side of the table. At first, I couldn't believe who I saw standing in front of me. My Uncle Mordechai, my mother's brother...

I remembered him as a tall, robust, hearty man. He must have been close to 6'2". The man standing in front of me seemed much smaller, thin from lack of food, his shoulders hunched over...

We hugged each other across the table. We talked as fast as we could, each asking about family members, neither having time to answer. A voice yelled out a number in German. My uncle stood up straight as we both came to attention and immediately became quiet.

"Yes, sir," my uncle automatically replied when the German guard called his number. As the guard approached, we both stood still, my uncle stiffly at attention, his expression fearful.

The guard told my uncle to stop wasting time and get back to work. Uncle Mordechai quickly followed the guard's instructions as the guard himself walked away. My uncle winked at me as he continued with his work.

...It was late in the day before he brought himself to ask about his sister [Rachel], my mother. I didn't have to tell him what I thought happened to her. He thought the same thing. Neither of us asked any more questions that day.

...I now had family nearby me, so I no longer felt completely alone. I derived a feeling of comfort in having my uncle... nearby... Uncle Mordechai was a very religious man, [and] knew large portions of the Torah by heart.

...I had been sorting clothes for only a couple of days when I found the tefillin... carefully wrapped in a prayer shawl, hidden within the sleeve of a shirt. During the weeks I sorted clothes, I would eventually find many such items, but that was the first. Someone



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Three brothers of author's mother, Rachel.
Uncle Mordechai is on the far left.

had taken great care in trying to hide his personal religious objects.

I took the prayer shawl out of the shirt and unwrapped the tefillin. They were obviously old and well used, but also very carefully taken care of. I could easily imagine a devout old man who had been using this same prayer shawl and set of tefillin for perhaps decades. As Uncle Mordechai passed by me, I showed it to him. His face lit up with an inner joy and excitement I [had never seen] before. Certainly, I don't recall ever seeing him as happy. He touched the items, very gently, as if afraid they might disappear. He seemed to forget that I was even there. Only because I was so close to him was I able to hear what he said as he murmured quietly in Yiddish, "It's been so long."

...On my way back to the barracks that night, I happened to see my uncle. He was standing behind a building, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. I saw immediately what he was doing. Somehow, he had managed to smuggle both the tefillin and the prayer shawl out of the sorting room. I have no idea how he accomplished this, with guards watching us so closely, but he had succeeded. It was something very important to him.

He had his arm wrapped in the thin leather strip of the tefillin as prescribed by thousands of years of ritual and tradition. His head bent slightly in prayer, he did not notice me or anyone else around him. He had chosen a place as out of the way as he could. In that, too, he had succeeded. Few people passed by, those that did ignoring him. Unfortunately, one of the few people to notice him was one of the guards. The guard saw my uncle before I even noticed the guard. It was only when he called out, demanding that my uncle account for himself, that I saw him approach. He raised his rifle like a club, yelling "thief!" as he ran at my uncle.

My uncle looked up in time to try to ward off the first blow. After that, he simply curled up as tightly as he

could, trying to make as small a target as possible, trying to protect his head as the guard rained down blow after blow.

I knew that the safest thing for me to do would be to run as far away as I could and to do it as fast as I could. ...I couldn't leave my uncle there, being beaten to death, the guard showing no signs of easing his assault. As far as I knew, he... might well be the only family I had left.... Watching the guard beat him, I thought of what must have happened to my father, and how no one was able to help him.

With no further thought, I ran toward them, crying out, begging the guard to stop. "He's my father," I said in German. "Please, please don't kill him." I came as close as I dared...

The guard stopped, looked at me...

He looked at my uncle with an expression of disgust I can envision to this day. "How come... you have a thief for a father?"...He had not stopped staring at my uncle, his grip on the rifle tightening.

"Sir, please," I continued to beg, "He made a mistake. That's all. Please [spare] his life." I saw my uncle move slightly, though he continued bleeding. Knowing he was still alive gave me greater courage. "I promise it will never happen again."

"...I won't be so lenient next time," the guard said as he cradled the rifle under his arm and walked away.

As soon as he was gone, I knelt beside my uncle, trying to see how badly he was injured. Bruised and bleeding, at least his breathing was strong and even. It could have been much worse. I held him in my arms as he began to relax.

"Don't ever do that again," I said softly in Yiddish, more plea than warning. "Promise me, please. If you ever see anything like that again, leave it alone. You see what happens."

He nodded his agreement, not yet able to speak. He still wore the tefillin on his arm. He put his other hand on



Egyptian soldiers captured, 1949



the leather strap, now stained with his blood. Only then did he begin to cry.

As he told me this story, Mr. Samuelson added that later, when he reminded his uncle that he was not to sneak out and put on tefillin again, his uncle had replied, "How can I resist when I see tefillin?"

One and a half million children were systematically killed by the Nazis. Perhaps the greatest cruelty inflicted on the Yidden was that they were forced to participate in the organized killing of their own, including their own children, their own sisters and brothers. Many Jews were forced to be sonderkommandos, who worked under the Nazis at the actual gas chambers. Since the Nazis did not want surviving eyewitnesses to their grisly work, they executed these sonderkommandos every three months. This is why there are only six Jews alive in the world today who were sonderkommandos in the camps.

Mr. Samuelson is one of these six surviving sonderkommandos. (In but one of his narrow escapes, Mr. Samuelson escaped under a pile of clothes before his three months were up.) His job was to organize the Jewish children to walk quickly and quietly into the gas chamber. It clearly hurt Mr. Samuelson to describe how the children were treated as they awaited their turn to die, but he did it, punctuating the story with, "Can you believe that? CAN you believe that?" as if to clarify that he is not exaggerating at all. Then he concluded quietly, "We treated our cattle better. We take them in from the rain."

In general, a recurring theme in Mr. Samuelson's story is that the Jews treated even their enemies like human beings, but the reverse was not so. For example, when he was fighting for the establishment of the land of Israel in 1949, and he took Egyptian prisoners (see pictures), he and the other Israeli soldiers always treated their prisoners humanely so long as they behaved. This was policy. But then he described some of the atrocities that would take place if G-d forbid a Jewish soldier fell into Egyptian hands...

How is a hero made? Read about the grandparents, parents, and upbringing of this man, and see.

Benjamin Samuelson was the fourth of five children, and the only boy. He writes about the day his baby sister was born, and the responsibility he accepted for her care. Though it is close to seventy years since this took place, he remembers it very clearly:

When I was seven, my little sis-

ter Gitel Marim was born. I had hoped for a little brother, but I was much happier with Gitel. I was still the only son, which I understood allowed me more freedom than my sisters enjoyed.

As usual, I was at Hebrew school most of the day. That evening, I arrived home about seven.... I walked in the door, greeted by more activity than I had seen in a long time...Sippora, just about a year older than me ...could not stop smiling. It was she who finally told me, "We have a new little sister. She's beautiful and healthy."

...Sippora took me by the hand. "Come with me, Benjamin. We've been waiting for you."

When I saw that tiny baby for the first time, I began smiling like everyone else in the house. She was everything Sippora said and more. She was sound asleep, so I didn't get to see her eyes; but I saw her hair was very fine, light blonde. Over the years, her hair would thicken and darken only slightly. I touched her hand very gently, afraid to waken her. Her skin was softer than anything I had ever felt.

Zaide came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, leaning over to whisper in my ear. "We're the men of the house," he said quietly. "It's our responsibility to take care of her."

I took Zaide's words very seriously. Still looking down at that new baby, I knew I would do anything for her. I would never allow anything to harm her. As her big brother, as one of the men of the house, I fully accepted my responsibility.

Gitel Marim was an unusual child, not only because of her beauty and special place in the family. She also hardly had to study:

Sometimes, getting home at seven or eight in the evening, my little sister would still be awake, doing her own homework for school, Mother helping her with anything she had difficulty with. What always impressed me was that Mother never had to help her very much. Gitel Marim was very intelligent. I watched as she did her studies and remembered, not that many years earlier, doing the same lessons. She never seemed to have to study as hard or put as much effort into it as I had to. I supposed I could have been envious at how easy she made it all look; instead, I was very proud that such a smart little girl was my sister.



The author (standing) on a mission: the liberation of Be'er Sheva (1948)

Most heartbreakingly of all, the author tells in detail of the day that, as a sonderkommando in charge of children, he watched as Gitel Marim, eyes red and swollen from tears, now silent, walked into the gas chamber.

I walked with the group of children to the gas chamber. Without having to watch her, I still knew, at any given moment, exactly where Gitel Marim was.

After it was over, he writes,

...an important part of me withered into virtual nonexistence. I don't even remember if I cried as her body was disposed of. I don't remember having any tears left... In fact, I recall very little of the next few days. I do recall that evening, in the barracks, I mentioned to some of the other men that I saw my little sister put into the gas chamber. As I had no words for Gitel Marim, no one had any words of comfort for me. I don't even believe any such words exist...

Learning about his life, all eight decades (may he live and be well until 120), Mr. Samuelson can only be described as the quintessential chevramahn (a word that defies translation). Flexible, a fast learner, charming and quick-witted, before the Nazis came to power he managed to become a wealthy and successful businessman although he was not yet 18! (I was fascinated by this young man's driving ambition and the story of how he became a businessman, so young

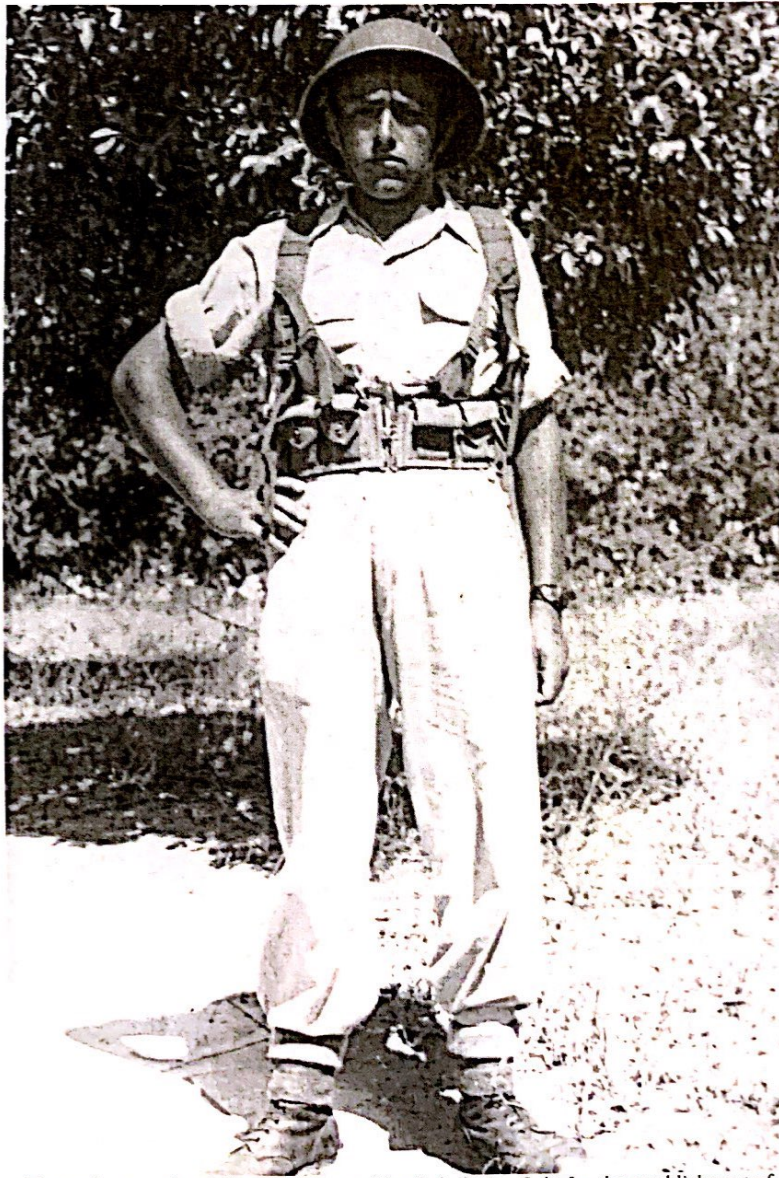
that he had to hide his age.) Along with that, he was the type of man who had inner strength and principles. He was (still is) a strong believer in taking care of his family, especially the weaker members.

To have had to watch that baby sister walk into the gas chamber and not be able to save her life was, it seems, the cruelest part of his entire experience. That was the day that he was forced literally at gunpoint to go completely against his nature, his upbringing, and all his principles. That he was able to survive that, then fight successfully for the creation of the Jewish state, then marry and raise a family, and remain the full-fledged exemplary mensch that he is today... still a chevramahn, still resourceful, still kind and still principled... open to human closeness, able to give it as well as accept it... is a powerful testament to what human

beings can achieve despite the pain and evil they endure.

When my son-in-law, Rabbi Chaim Bryski, introduced Mr. Samuelson to the people in shul on Shabbos afternoon, he did it with the story of a group of small chasidische boys with long payos that was brought to the gas chamber. This story is found in the book:

... My task was to make certain the children formed and stayed in neat, orderly lines. A group of young, very Orthodox boys, maybe twenty in all, stayed together for comfort and reassurance. Despite our telling them nothing, they seemed to know and understand what was about to happen. The boys remained calm and polite. They followed our directions, standing patiently in their lines of five. Not one of them questioned or argued as we began



The author wearing helmet and ammunition belt during fight for the establishment of a Jewish state, 1948

our walk from the open field.

Spontaneously, one of the little boys started singing. The other boys joined him. The song "Ani Maamin" was one that I had also learned in Hebrew school. "I firmly believe in the coming of the Messiah; and although he may tarry, I daily wait for his coming," they sang in Hebrew. Their voices strong and confident, they walked into the gas chamber. They continued singing as we closed the doors. The words from their song remained strong, clear... Gradually, their voices grew weaker, softer... Within an hour, where once Hebrew words rose to G-d in devout voice, there was only silence.

The Holocaust which took place 60 years ago is no different than the era of slavery and murder in Mitzrayim, or the murderous decree (later averted) on all Jews in Persia, or the Spanish Inquisition, or the violent Cossack pogroms, or any other example of cruel and terrible persecution of the Jews, in that we have an obligation to

teach our children about it.

As Jews, we are strongly committed to transmitting all of our history to our children, even the painful parts. As parents, grandparents, and educators, we have a responsibility to see to it that the younger generation, some of whom have never met anyone with those blue numbers embedded permanently in the flesh of his/her arm, absorbs the history of the Holocaust.

I highly recommend *Abiding Hope* by Benjamin E. Samuelson for most children over twelve (depending on maturity and temperament). There are no pictures. It holds its reader tightly in its grasp; I finished it within 24 hours with very little sleeping time, as did some of my children. Parts are painful to read; parts are suspenseful, even electrifying; parts are inspirational. The first third of the book describes life in pre-war Europe from the point of view of a child in a large, happy, close knit family, complete with cousins and grandparents. The middle third is about Mr. Samuelson's time in the camps. And the last third is happy and exciting to read; it is about his many close calls and



1936, the author's family, left to right: older sister Frieda, mother Rachel, father Shmuel, younger sister Gitel Marim, and the author. (Missing from the picture: older sisters Sippora and Chana)

thrilling adventures in getting himself and many others into Israel (then under the British Mandate, so Jews were allowed in only under a ridiculously tiny quota system) and his part in the Israeli struggle for independence. Many children do not know very much about all that took place in 1949 and this book will edify and enlighten.

This book is also a necessary read for the many Jews who have not been educated in Torah, and are unaware that there were Jews who maintained their faith in G-d in the camps, and even drew strength from it. It would behoove shluchim and shluchos, who come into contact with many such Jews (uneducated in Torah), to bring this book to their attention. Let them see proof that even in the very, very worst of circumstances, Judaism is "a tree of life to all who hold tight to her."

Non-religious Jews and your children and grandchildren aside, I recommend that you read this book yourself. I encourage you to buy it, to read it, to own it, to give it, to treasure it. This is not a book to borrow; it deserves a place of honor in your personal library. This book belongs in every Jewish home.

As Mr. Samuelson said to me, "I am relying on Chabad to get this book out to the Jewish people. Reform and Conservative won't do it. The other Orthodox Jews won't do it. *Only Chabad will do it.* I am an old man and have plenty of money; I don't want to make any money from it. I just want people to know what happened, and I want them to

take out my book and read it every Tisha B'Av, on the Jewish day of mourning."

May there not be any more Tisha B'Avs with the coming of Moshiach now, when those who rest in dust will rise and rejoice. ❧

Please mail your check or money order for \$19.95, payable to Chabad of Thousand Oaks, to 2060 Ave. Los Arboles #117, Thousand Oaks, CA 91362. Regularly \$25, this special price (\$19.95) for readers of the N'shei Chabad Newsletter includes shipping and handling. If you prefer, you may email chabadto@aol.com with your credit card information and a request for *Abiding Hope*. Every book bought through Chabad of Thousand Oaks will be personally autographed by the author.

Special thanks to Dina Posner for her help in writing this book review.

Congratulations to the eight raffle winners from Crown Heights to the Mid-Winter Convention, S. Louis, Mo.:

Esther Coren, Esther Katz, Shoula Nash, Nechami Blotner, Tobi Vogel, Bluma Schneider, Leah Dubrawski and Civia Grossman

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