

My name is Ariela Zahemski. But my friends call my Ari.

I don't remember when I first became aware that I am the child of Holocaust survivors. Then again, I don't remember not knowing either. I knew my parents had accents, that all their friends had accents, and that they weren't born here, but those were pretty much the only conclusions I drew as a young child. Later on, I became aware of this terrifying unspeakable tragedy – that a horrible man leading a rudderless nation had endeavored to wipe out the Jewish people and that regrettably, most of the world had stood by and done nothing, or very little, to stop it. I remember watching World at War and seeing old film and newsreels of the tyrannical Nazi regime and feeling nauseous and quite unsettled. I remember reading books that were perhaps too heavy for a child like Night, by Elie Wiesel and not being able to sleep. I remember being afraid it would happen again. My grandmother was a holocaust educator, and was active in telling the story of our people during that horrible time, and she reassured me that it was really up to us to change the future by educating and advocating and never, ever forgetting. There was comfort in that for me. Putting the power in my hands eased my fears.

There were periods of time in my childhood that I remember there was sadness in my home connected to the Holocaust, and I recall going to Yom Hashoah events that made my Mother cry. Sometimes that made me sad, as I got older it made me angry at times. I didn't understand why remembering had to be so emotionally charged. Part of it was being a teenager, selfish and insolent, and part of it was grounded in the reality that no amount of tears could change the past. I understood then, and still do now that we must never forget, we must always remember and it is our sacred responsibility to make sure that we tell our children, and everyone else's children about the atrocities committed against the Jewish People.

I am here speaking to you tonight because I am the child of a holocaust survivor. And in my mind, the most important word in that sentence is SURVIVOR. My mother's mother was born in the town of Chmielnick, Poland. My mother was born in the city of Lodz which sometimes was in Poland, sometimes in the Ukraine. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939- my grandmother and my mother, then less than a year old, traveled back to Chmielnick to my grandmother's family. As the story goes, my great grandparents wanted my grandmother to leave my mother with them. She was planning to go to Russia- and get as far away from the approaching disaster as possible. If my grandmother had made the ostensibly easier decision, and left my mother with my great grandparents, you would be listening to a different speaker tonight as my great grandparents, and almost all of my grandmothers family, save a few uncles who had made it to America before the war died in the Treblinka concentration camp. One moment, one decision, and the course of our little piece of history would have been changed. But the fact is, my grandmother took that tiny baby who was my mother, and got her safely to Russia, and 69 years later, I stand here before you a grown woman, and the mother of a daughter preparing to become a bat mitzvah.

There are responsibilities incumbent upon those who survived, and people like me, who are the survivors of survivors. We must tell the story, we must share our pain, we must cling to our Jewish history, culture, families and faith. For me, there are two more things I must do. First, even on this day when we remember such dark times and such painful loss- I must remember to rejoice in the fact that I have survived. As an individual, as a part of my family and as part of the Jewish people. Loosely interpreted, The Talmud says that when you end a life, you destroy the world by destroying all the possibilities that life may have held, but in preserving a life- as mine was preserved by the decision my Grandmother made, you are creating endless worlds of possibility. So the second thing I must do is to be a voice in this world for change. To help those who need to be empowered by teaching them about survival.

I can't change what happened to my family, or those of the 6 million Jews who died, or the other millions of victims of the Holocaust- some of whom were righteous gentiles and conscientious objectors. But, today, I can be a voice for our fellow human beings who are suffering in places both near and far. Today I can reach out my hand to those who need help. Today I can make sure that I treasure my Jewish identity and enrich it by continuing to learn, and grow as part of an evolving culture that is ancient, yet renewed every time a child learns to say a blessing. There is still so much to be learned from our history, but I feel it is vitally important to view myself and all the Jewish people as survivors, not victims. It is true that we seem to have had at times a rougher go than many people have had on our little blue planet, however we are here now. And right now, today, is the only time we will ever have the power to effect the changes that must be made in order to prevent another holocaust from taking place anywhere and to anyone. It is not enough to remember. We must take action, each of us in whatever way we can to strengthen the Jewish people, and the world, so that Never Again will not be a hope, but a reality.