

WHEN
HUMANITY
FAILS toolbox

MORAL DILEMMA SERIES

– “MOMENTS OF CHOICE”

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Conditions and circumstances during the Holocaust forced people to make what Holocaust historian Lawrence L. Langer refers to as “choiceless choices.” According to Langer, these choices do not “reflect options between life and death, but between one form of ‘abnormal’ response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim’s choosing.” We often refer to these moments of choice as “moral dilemmas;” however, even this term detracts from the magnitude of the decisions that victims made using their own moral values and judgments in the face of an environment and reality that altogether lacked “morals.”

Victims of the Holocaust were faced with a wide range of painful choices: distributing limited food rations within a family; identifying safe and good hiding places; obtaining false identities for only some members of the family; using pull or bribery to save oneself or a family member in a concentration camp; risking life and limb by jumping from a train; delivering one’s young child into the hands of a stranger in the hope of saving that child’s life; or even remaining at home in spite of a Nazi order to prepare for deportation. It is impossible for us to say what an individual would have done under these circumstances, just as it is impossible for us to criticize the decisions that victims ultimately made during these times.

Non-Jewish rescuers were also faced with similar moments of choice. Rescuers suppressed their own fear and knowledge of potential punishment or even death in order to secretly help an “enemy” of the Nazi regime. Rescuers not only risked their own lives by choosing to help a Jew, but they also risked the lives of anyone else living in their homes. While the motive for aiding a Jew was different depending upon the situation, all rescuers of Jews were faced with moments of choice that would forever alter the direction and meaning of their lives.

The following series demonstrates the types of dilemmas faced by Jews and non-Jews during the Holocaust. This series includes an 11-minute trigger film, a 10-minute film clip, and two written primary source accounts. Each of these examples represents painful choices by victims or rescuers of the Holocaust.

1. Pigeon – This is an 11-minute film that recounts a rare act of kindness by a complete stranger towards a Jewish refugee on a train in Remes, France in 1941. It is a reenactment of a real story.

- a. Pay close attention to details as you watch:
Notice the man's passport, the ticket that he purchases, the newspaper article he is reading
Notice his behavior and mannerisms.
Notice what the boys do as they approach him.



- b. Why would the man draw attention to himself by getting involved with the boy and the slingshot, if he is clearly discreetly trying to escape from Nazi-occupied France?
- c. Focus on the newspaper that he reads. What does the newspaper article reveal?
- d. Do you think the woman sitting in the seat next to him is Jewish? Does it matter?
- e. Why do you think she chooses to do what she does for him?
- f. When do you think she makes the choice to act as a rescuer? Do you think she decided beforehand?
- g. Does the man in the film ever thank the woman who saved him?
- h. What is the significance of the dead pigeon in the snow?
- i. Why is the film called "Pigeon?"

2. The Last Scene – This 10-minute film segment is a reenactment of a real event that happened in the life of its producer. Menucha’s father immigrates to Palestine while the rest of his family remains in Poland. When the family receives word from their father abroad, it is evident that he was only successful in obtaining tickets and paperwork for his wife and two of their three daughters, Hadassah and Menucha.

Mindel, the middle child, will have to stay behind with her grandmother, with promises from her mother that she will bring her to Palestine as soon as possible. This film is produced in modern day Israel by Menucha, who on a daily basis faces the guilt and anguish that her sister was left in Europe and killed at the hands of the Nazis. While this is a short clip, it raises a poignant and impossible dilemma.



- a. Familiarize yourself with the names of the characters.
Mindel • Haddasah • Menucha
- b. What two primary sources are being used for capturing the narrator’s memory?
- c. How can you explain the mother’s reasoning for leaving Mindel, one of her children, in Europe? What might she be thinking?
- d. How do you think this might have affected the rest of the family?
- e. Do you think she truly believed that they would be reunited?
- f. The producer creates this film more than 50 years after the fateful day that her sister was left behind in Poland. What does this fact tell us about the imprint that the event made on her life?
- g. While the family in Palestine escapes the Nazis, Mindel is not fortunate enough to escape in time and she is killed. What kind of life do you think her mother lived after the war?
- h. Why do you think Menucha, the producer, includes the scenes in her film that document how the actress feels about the real-life dilemma her mother faced?
- i. The actress who portrays the mother in the film states that while the film was produced in Mindel’s honor, the “tragedy that it represents is a shared one.” Explain what she means.

- j. Have you ever considered the types of choices that modern parents make for their children? List some of these significant choices.
- k. What is the purpose of the producer creating this film? What does the production do for her? Explain how you came to this conclusion.

3. Primary Source Account A

Activity Procedure:

Read the following excerpt from Aliza Bark-Resser's account of hiding in the forest with her parents. Aliza's father sends her on a mission to find food for the family in a nearby village. When she does not return, her parents argue about what they should do to find her. As they argue, Aliza returns and overhears their difference of opinion. Most striking is her mother's willingness to sacrifice the lives of the entire family in order to remain a family unit throughout their suffering.

Pay close attention to the choice that her father had to make for the needs of the family and the choice that her mother was prepared to make for her individual child.

Mother expressed vigorous opposition: "Wandering around the forest has driven you crazy! How dare you even think of the child going by herself to the village, to a place that is completely foreign to her? You are sending the child directly to her doom! I won't have it!" Father, of course, was prepared to go himself, but his appearance would betray him immediately; and Mother did not know the local language, so the only remaining option was me...

Not too long after that, I heard murmured speech and weeping, which increased, as I got closer. I felt enormous relief when I recognized the voices of my family. I began to run with renewed strength. I tripped over branches lying in my path, and every now and then I stumbled and fell. However, when I finally came really close, a terrible sight was before me: Father was standing opposite Mother with his shoulders slumped, Mother was screaming and crying, shaking him with her two clenched fists and shouting "You sent your daughter to her death! God, why did I agree? Come on, let's all go and give ourselves up to the transport, because only there will we find the child." Suddenly, when they noticed me, there was an awkward silence. Mother's hands slid down. Father ran to me with his eyes full of tears, took the packages of food, hugged me and held me to his heart and whispered: "Our darling, this is another time that God has directed you to help us and you succeeded! That's another good sign, and it's not impossible that we'll emerge from this inferno safely."

- a. What did the narrator's father ask her to do?
- b. Knowing the danger and risk involved, why would he ask her to do such a thing?
- c. Why was her mother so upset?
- d. What sacrifice was the narrator willing to make for her family?
- e. What sacrifice was the narrator's mother willing to make?

- f. Life during the Holocaust proposed impossible situations, where people had to make the types of decisions and choices that would seem unfeasible to those of us living during normal times. Is it possible to say under these circumstances that any of these decisions were wrong?

4: Primary Source Account B

Activity Procedure:

Read the following account from Eva Fogelman’s book *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*. Fogelman describes the rescue work of a Polish man, Alexander Roslan, who saw the suffering of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto and chose to hide two Jewish boys in his home. All non-Jews in Poland knew that the consequence for hiding a Jew meant certain death. When one of the boys in hiding, Jacob, became seriously sick and could only be treated in a hospital, Alexander was faced with a risky choice. If he went to a doctor, the doctor could denounce him for hiding a Jew and surely kill him and Jacob. If he neglected to find a doctor, Jacob would surely die from his illness.

I went there. Maybe the doctor would be there, I thought; maybe the clinic would be there – maybe not. The war had destroyed a lot. But I went to this address. The building was ok; the clinic was there. I knocked on the door. A man opened the door. I said, “I’d like to talk to Dr. Stepanovicz,” and he said, “I am Dr. Stepanovicz.” I showed him the card [from the first doctor, describing Jacobs’s symptoms]. He said, “Right away – get to the hospital!” I say, “Doctor, I don’t know. Maybe it will be better in a clinic.” He says, “No, I won’t have an empty bed for another week. I have no place now.” But I said, “Doctor, the boy is a Jewish boy.”

I watched his eyes for a reaction. I was scared. He said, “Go home. I will send a doctor to check the boy. The doctor will be safe, no danger.”

- What was the difficult choice that Alexander Roslan needed to make?
- What do you think went through Alexander’s thoughts as he “watched the doctor’s eyes for a reaction?”
- What do you think enabled the doctor to make a moral choice to help a Jewish child?
- Use this chart to organize the four real-life choices that were made in this moral dilemma series. Help students understand the actual choice and details of what was involved. Then enable them to react and question the unimaginable choices.

Aliza Bark-Resser. *The Screams of a Child: The story of the Survival of a Family in Slovakia*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2000. p.99.

Pigeon Guide. Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York in conjunction with the Consortium of Holocaust Educators of the American Friends of the Ghetto Fighters’ Museum.

Fogelman, Eva. *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994. p.111.

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