

## Shabbat Vayikira/Zachor, March 23, 2024

By: David de Graaf

As some of you may be aware, my father is a survivor of the Shoah. Joop was born in 1942 in occupied Netherlands, amidst the chaos of World War II and the relentless hunt for Jews by the Nazis. He was the middle child of three siblings born during this tumultuous time. There exists a poignant image of Joop at the tender age of two, holding hands with his three-year-old brother Theo, captured in a field near one of their hiding places. They appear angelic, innocent, yet the backdrop of their existence was anything but serene.

Joop wears tight shorts with shoulder straps, likely holding up a cloth diaper, while my uncle Theo, with a protective and serious demeanor, dons shorts fastened with a makeshift belt buckle, perhaps fashioned from an adult's belt. Should you be interested, the story of my family is chronicled in a Haaretz article from 2022, featuring this very image. In reflecting on this seemingly joyful moment amid the horror of history, one thought consistently overwhelms me: How could anyone conceive of hunting down and murdering a toddler? What twisted ideology or philosophy could drive individuals to commit such heinous acts against completely innocent children?

Joop, Theo, and their younger sister Ruth owed their survival to their protectors, foremost among them being my grandmother Rebecca's husband, my grandfather Leendert de Graaf. Opa Leen was not Jewish; he was a staunch pacifist involved in the resistance, leading a group of Anabaptists dedicated to saving as many Jewish lives as possible. They played an active role in rescuing at least 17 Jewish families, some of it has been captured at Yad VaShem. And Opa Leen, did not only help others, he saved his own Jewish family. The field where that cherished picture was taken lay adjacent to a farm where my grandfather's close friend, Uncle Wout, harbored many Jews at different points in time. When I was a child, we would regularly visit the place and I remember Oom Wout taking us in his small row boat on the waters that surrounded his farm. For a densely populated country like the Netherlands, this farm was isolated.

During my visit to the Netherlands, with my eldest child, Shanie, last summer we drove by his place and I now realize how intensely brave he was. The farm is surrounded by other farms and accessible by major roads that already existed. Nazis and Nazi supporters must have gone by there on a regular basis. We also visited the striking Names Monument. Adjacent to the renowned Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, the monument comprises walls forming the Hebrew word "zachor" (remembrance). Each wall made of bricks and each brick bears the name of one of the 102,000 individuals, Jews and a small group of Roma, along with their birthdates and places of murder. Tragically, about 600 of our relatives are commemorated on those stones—individuals who lacked protectors like Oom Wout and Opa Leen, who couldn't find the kindness and support that aided the 25 percent of Dutch Jews who survived.

Today marks Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath preceding one of our most joyous occasions, Purim. However, our recollections today are somber—a reflection on the profound sorrow of our collective past.

We read today: "Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey... Therefore... blot out the memory of Amalek... Do not forget!" Lo tishkach! When I contemplate these words, I envision my father's ordeal. Children often lag behind, vulnerable and weary. But why did others die and why did he mercifully survive. It's easy to harbor anger toward Amalek for their atrocities and project Amalek onto others in history, prompting the directive to blot out their memory. But how do we reconcile blotting out while not forgetting?

Traditionally, this injunction demands we remember to eradicate Amalek entirely or actively recall the harm they inflicted. Yet, another interpretation emerges when we read about our own role in that suffering. How come we could be surprised? How come that in our community there are people who are famished and weary? How come that we don't take care of the stragglers? Like my grandfather Leendert and his comrades, we must remember our duty to protect the vulnerable, ensuring that the disadvantaged, the innocent, are shielded from overwhelming harm. What differentiates my father and his siblings from the names etched in Amsterdam's Holocaust memorial? Was it mere luck? Or was it the indifference of the majority of the Dutch population toward those lives? Could they have rationalized

that Dutch Jews were not their concern, not "their" burden to bear?

When I witness the plight of hostages in Gaza, read of Gazan's starving children and shattered families, I recognize them all as our own. This Shabbat Zachor and Purim, it's our obligation to remember and protect them in any way we can. Shabbat shalom.