

Discussion questions for individual readers and Book Clubs

**“In the Unlikeliest of Places: How Nachman Libeskind Survived the Nazis, Gulags and Soviet Communism”**

1. Nachman grew up in a very poor home. What aspects of his family’s life contributed to his happy childhood?
2. Nachman considered his elementary school his second home. Its multifaceted curriculum, stressing the arts and world cultures, and camaraderie among staff and students, had a life-long impact on Nachman’s world view. Nachman’s school experiences molded him into an optimistic, intellectually curious person who always at home with people whose backgrounds, customs, and cultures were different from his own. Have you, or your children had a similarly impactful school experience? Would strict religious schooling produce the same results? Why or why not?
3. As a teen in Lodz, Nachman recorded one of his father’s oral tales and sent it to the YIVO headquarters in Vilna, Lithuania. Sixty years later upon learning that his story had survived and been included a book titled “Yiddish Folktales,” Nachman went to the YIVO headquarters in New York and literally held the fragile piece of paper in his hands. What do you think this says about the ephemeral nature of human lives versus the written word? Does it make you stop and consider if today’s methods of communication can stand this same test of time?
4. It is difficult for many people today to appreciate the stark difference between communism and socialism, in particular pre- WWII Jewish Labor Bund socialism. Does learning about Nachman’s belief in workers’ rights to a fair wage and reasonable work conditions change your perceptions of social democracy today, especially in the context of various progressive political movements around the globe?
5. Soon after WWII broke out, Nachman experienced great disappointment in the way he was treated by Herr Boltz and later, in the Soviet Union, by his old teacher Resnik? What changed? Do you believe there are different levels of betrayal? How does betrayal affect trust? Has a sudden and unexpected change of a relationship happened to you? How did you respond?
6. Most people who think about the destruction of eastern European Jews during WWII think about Nazi concentration camps. Wider public awareness of Jewish experiences in Soviet gulags did not happen until the early 21-st century. Why do you think it took seven decades for it to come to light? Do you think that Jews who were imprisoned in Soviet gulags should be considered survivors? Why or why not?
7. Was there anything that surprised you about Nachman’s reactions to his experiences in the Soviet Union?

8. To what extent do you believe that Nachman's life experiences—both positive and negative—shaped not only him, but his children, Annette and Daniel? Did any aspects of your own upbringing, connected to your parents history, provide a springboard for your personal achievements, or failures?
9. Think about the factors that led Nachman to leave his family behind and emigrate to a country whose language he didn't speak? How did you feel when forty-eight year old Nachman was told he was too old to get a job in Israel? Have you ever been discriminated against based on your age? What, if anything, did you do about it?
10. And similarly, how would you feel if you were told your mother tongue, or dialect, or accent was unwelcome in your community? Would you discard it to fit in? How would you manage in a new country and support your family if you didn't speak the language and your only skills depended on language?
11. In his seventh decade, Nachman, a man with a primary school education, who studied English in night school while working a forty-hour work week, read 40-50 books a year. What do you think motivated this ambitious reading goal? What types of books do you think he read? Make a list of 5-10 books you would like to read this year. What intrigues you about these books? Do you think your choices depict your season in life, or perhaps foreshadow seasons yet to come?
12. Art restored Nachman's optimism that was muted after the death of his dear Dora. Nachman began painting in his seventies and took up the keyboard in his late eighties. Have you experienced a similar loss and how did (or are) you reaching for something to restore color to your life? Do you think that sometimes it is too late to start a project that interests you? Why or why not?
13. Nachman never discussed the meaning of his art, only indicating "It was in my head and just had to come out." The author provides insight into her thoughts regarding her father's painting "I Remember Zina." Based on the Nachman you now know from the book, do you have some ideas about what he may have been saying to us in his other works such as "Lady with the Green Hair"; "Evening at the Pops," or "Holocaust" ?
14. Nachman considered his granddaughter Jessica's service in the military a symbol of confirming his status as an American. She was repaying his debt for admission to the country and achieved a rank he never could in the Polish military. Have you encountered times in your life where sacrifices you'd made, or work thought un-noticed or appreciated, later seemed to yield treasures in the lives of your children or grandchildren? Can you describe what it felt like to experience?

15. Why do you think Nachman maintained a life-long love for his native city of Lodz, a city impacted by industrial pollution and not generally regarded as the most beautiful in Poland?
  
16. Is your relationship with your parents such that you could write a memoir about their lives? If your parents are still alive, make a list of questions you've never asked to get a deeper idea about their lives, their successes, their disappointments and how they dealt with them.
  
17. What do you think of Jacob's decision not to permit his teenage son Isser to flee with his uncle Nachman? What does this say about Jacob's conception of family? What is your view of keeping the family unit intact versus saving a part of it if the whole cannot be saved? Do you think Isser would have enhanced or impeded Nachman's chances of survival?