

Integrity Curriculum
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Beacon Hill Friends Meeting
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Lesson 10: Authenticity - 'Passing' - Part 1

Silent worship (5 minutes). *Begin with 5 minutes of silent worship. Use a candle or other object (like the jar of water with sludge slowly sedimenting down) to help kids center down. Anyone can give a message but doesn't have to. Adult models this!*

Snack. *Lay out snack after worship. Make it available throughout.*

Quotes – *keep various integrity quotes on display throughout the lesson without comment.*

We have been talking about Living an Authentic Life – that is, living a life that is true to who you really are.

Today, we are going to take a look at an extreme case of someone who did exactly the opposite – lived a life that is false in an important way.

First, who knows what 'passing' is? What are the aspects of themselves that people might try to hide? *(get kids to brainstorm definitions and ideas, write them down systematically)*

Passing is when a person lives as if s/he is a member of a social group than his or her own.

Aspects that someone might want to hide are:

- Race (passing for white)
- Religion (passing as Christian or whatever the majority religion is)
- Sexual orientation (passing as straight)
- Disability (hiding a disability that is 'invisible' such as a hearing, vision or mobility problem)

What do all of these types of 'passing' have in common? They are about someone falsifying himself or herself in order to be like the group that has more social power.

Here is a story of one man who did this under extreme circumstances. His name is Solomon Perel. *(display the photos on the last page!)*

Solomon Perel was born in 1925 in Germany to a Jewish family. He escaped persecution by the Nazis by masquerading as an ethnic German. Like many other Jews, the family was harshly persecuted when the Nazis came to power, and after their shoe shop was pillaged by German Nazi vandals, Solomon's father moved the family to [Poland](#) in when he was 10 years old, in 1935 .

Four years later, in 1939, the Germans invade Poland. When Solomon is 14, his parents send him and his older brother Isaak away to the part of Poland occupied by the Soviets (Russians) where they felt they would be safe. (Germany and Soviet Russia were on opposite sides during the war, so if you were in trouble on one side, it made sense to go to the other).

Solomon and Isaak eventually arrive at an organization that helps Jewish refugees. Since he is younger, the organization sends Solomon to an orphanage run by the Russians. At this point he and his brother are separated; his brother remains behind in the German-occupied part of Poland. For two years, until he is about 16, Solomon lives a normal life as a Jewish boy. He is even able to communicate with his family by letters.

However, eventually Hitler invades this part of Poland too, and the orphanage has to be evacuated. In the confusion, Solomon makes the decision to bury his identity papers so there is no proof he is Jewish. He is captured by a German army unit. But since he was born in Germany and speaks perfect German, he is able to convince his captors that he is an ethnic German who happened to be in Poland because the Russians killed his parents and sent him to the orphanage. The Germans believe him. They take him in, and he changes his name to from Solomon Perel to Josef Perjell. He becomes the Russian translator for the German army unit fighting on the front line. 'Josef' proves himself to be such a good German that they decide, since he is still a minor, to send him to Germany to go to a Hitler Youth school.

At school it is even harder to hide his Jewish identity. He lives in constant fear of being discovered because as a Jew, he is circumcised. However, he tries to live as normal a life as possible. He even has a girlfriend by the name of Leni. She is a fervent [Nazi](#), so although Solomon loves her, he dares not tell her that he is Jewish for fear that she would turn him in. Later, Leni's mother discovers Solomon is Jewish and in a moment of anguish he confesses. His enormous good fortune is that she keeps his secret. For four more years, he manages to keep his secret.

Close to the end of the war Solomon is captured by the US Army, but is released the next day. After traveling back to his home town, Solomon learns that his parents and sister had died during the war. But after making dozens of inquiries everywhere he can, he did finally locate his brother Isaak, along with another brother, David, and they are reunited.

In 1948 Perel resettled in the newly-created nation of Israel, where he joined the army to fight in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. He later left the Israeli army to become a businessman. He is still living today, in Tel Aviv, the capital of Israel.

How did he manage it? In his book, Perel says he played his role so well that at times he almost forgot he was Jewish. But he could never truly forget his roots and waited for the day he could be free and not have to "hide". What kept him going even when he thought he could take no more were his strong determination to live and the memory of his mother's last words to him: "You must stay alive!" (Perel autobiography, p.7). He writes, "I gradually suppressed my true self. Sometimes I even 'forgot' that I was a Jew." (Perel, p.58) . But "I knew that I had to find some solution for my identity problem until these dark times were over...the faith and certainty that I would not be in this place forever sustained me." (Perel, p. 77)

Solomon kept silent about his story for decades. He worried that people wouldn't believe him, and he also felt that since he had not suffered as much as those in concentration camps, he did not have the right to compare himself to others who had suffered more.

What changed his mind was when he was about to go in for an heart operation and worried that if he died during it, "I didn't want to take the story into the grave." So, 50 years after it happened, in 1990, he did eventually write his autobiography called *I Was Hitler Youth Salomon*. That same year a movie was made about his life, based on his book, called *Europa Europa*. It won an award for Best Foreign Film.

Discussion

- What do you think of Solomon's decision? Did he do the right thing to deny his true identity?
- If you think it was OK, what made it so? (*the life-or-death circumstances, the fact that he felt Jewish in his heart, etc*)
- What do you think it cost Solomon (morally) to live such an inauthentic life? How do you think he came to terms with it?
- What are we to make of the fact that he stayed silent for so long? Was this a form of deceit, letting others assume that being a German Jew he had probably spent the war in a concentration camp, when in fact he hadn't? Or was it his way of showing deference to those who had suffered more?

Next week we will look at other stories of 'passing' that are a little morally complicated, a little less black and white than this one!



Salomon Perel (center)



Solomon Perel today



