



## **SPIRITUAL HEROISM IN THE HOLOCAUST ERA**

**H**istorians, educators and curators offer many reasons to study the Holocaust.

For Torah Jews seeking to grow in spirituality and in a relationship with Hashem, there is a special dimension to Holocaust studies: role models in spiritual heroism.

Role models inspire us to achieve greatness. The Torah consciously presents role models from whom we are supposed to learn and grow. By taking a close look at Jewish life before, during and after the Holocaust, we can be inspired by countless individuals of different backgrounds

and social strata whose devotion to Torah, Judaism and Hashem are nothing short of heroic. Unlike armed resistance, their spiritual resistance is a form of heroism manifest in personal conviction and unbreakable commitment to values.<sup>1</sup> It is a priceless legacy and a model that can inspire us in our generation. This presentation is a mere drop in the ocean of tears that is the Holocaust literature of spiritual heroism. Moreover, these acts of heroism help us appreciate some of the dire challenges that Jews faced during this time.

### **Pre-War**

Rabbi Isaiah Wohlgemuth zt"l (1915-2008) succeeded his father as a Rabbi in Kitzingen, Germany in 1935; the subsequent years in Germany were marked by the Nuremberg Laws and anti-Semitic persecution culminating with Kristallnacht.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Wohlgemuth captures his tenure as a rabbi in Germany with a surprising and enlightening description:

*I have classified the years from 1933 to 1939 as another Golden Age in Jewish history. You might think it strange to refer to those years as a Golden Age...*

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*The most significant aspect of this period, however, was our ability to study Jewish texts and observe the great spiritual heritage of our ancestors. The political oppression of those years might have frustrated most people in the world, but it did not frustrate the Jews in Germany, who, in spite of all the obstacles, difficulties, and hardships, dedicated all their free time to learn Torah, in the widest sense of the word...*

*Suddenly, everyone in my congregation wanted to learn Torah Shebichtav (the written word of Torah) and Torah Sheba'al Peh (the oral law of Torah).*

*They also wanted to improve their knowledge of English and modern Hebrew. They believed that these languages would make it easier for them to adjust in the countries to which they would immigrate.*

*I was busy every hour of the day, and what happened in my congregation happened all over Germany. The most assimilated Jews wanted to increase their knowledge of Jewish studies. There was a tremendous search for knowledge that was unequaled in all Jewish history. Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Leo Baeck, to name a few, were leading scholars of this renaissance of Jewish learning.*

*In the Orthodox community, the Munks, the Wohlgemuths, the Cohens, the Breuers, the Biberfelds, the Freimans, the Carlebachs, and many others taught Talmud virtually all day long. We did not think of the dangers ahead of us, and we continued on the path that we set for ourselves.<sup>3</sup>*

Remarkably, we learn that despite the intense Nazi persecution of their time, many Jews, including those previously less engaged, embraced their Judaism and Torah learning.

Additionally, the pre-war persecutions brought with them a host of halachic

questions. For example, Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg zt"l (1884-1966), who spent most of the war years in a German labor camp for Soviet prisoners, was asked whether it was permitted to host a concert in the sanctuary of a synagogue since Jews were barred from concert halls in Germany, and they sought the comfort and culture of music (*Seridei Eish* 1:12).

Kristallnacht led to the incarceration of more than 30,000 Jews in concentration camps in Germany, where hundreds died. In many cases, families received only a container of ashes of their relatives, and many raised questions regarding burial. In response to these issues, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kirschbaum zt"l Hy"d (1895-1942) — author of the multi-volume responsa *Menachem Meishiv* — published a monograph called *Kuntrus Efer Serufim* detailing the halachos related to cremated remains.<sup>4</sup>

## **Wartime**

After the outbreak of the war, anti-Jewish persecution intensified throughout Europe, yet many Jews continued to cling to their observance of halacha. The *Sheelot Uteshuvot Mikadshei Hashem* by Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Meisels zt"l (1902-1974)<sup>5</sup> of Veitzin, Hungary, includes his responsa and those of other Hungarian rabbis during the wartime period that shed light on halachic concerns. One responsum deals with the use of unwatched flour for matzah due to food shortages (#64) and another regarding the time for women to immerse in a mikvah while a city was subject to a curfew (#71).

As the war progressed, the many

Eastern European Jews who had not been murdered by German Einsatzgruppen and their collaborators were confined to ghettos. The living conditions in these circumstances were exceedingly difficult, yet many Jews continued to embrace their Torah lives.<sup>6</sup> One example is found in the writings of Zelig Kalmanovitch zt"l Hy"d (1915-1944), a leading religious member of YIVO Institute for Jewish research in Vilna. He describes Simchat Torah celebrations in the Vilna ghetto in 1941 in his diary that was written at the time and published posthumously:

*Upon the invitation of the rabbi, I went on Simhat Torah eve for hakafot in a house that had formerly been a synagogue and was now a music school. The remaining yeshiva students and scholars were gathered there, as well as some children. There was singing and dancing. The commandant and his assistants were also there. I was honored with the first hakafa. H. K. [Herman Kruk] also came to see the spectacle. I said a few words: "Our song and our dance are a form of worship. Our rejoicing is due to Him who decrees life and death. Here in the midst of this small congregation, in the poor and ruined synagogue, we are united with the whole house of Israel, not only with those who are here today and with the tens of thousands of the pure and saintly who have passed on to life eternal, but with all the generations of Jews who were before us. In our rejoicing today we give thanks for the previous generations, the noble generations in which life was worthwhile. We feel that with our song today we sanctify the name of Heaven just as our ancestors did. And, I, a straying Jewish soul, feel that my roots are here. And you, in your rejoicing atone for the sins of a generation that is perishing. I know that the Jewish people*

*will live, for it is written: 'As the days of the heaven upon the earth.' And even if we were the last generation, we should give thanks and say: 'Enough for us that we were privileged to be the children of those!' And every day that the Holy One, blessed be He, in His mercy gives us is a gift, which we accept with joy and give thanks to His holy name.'*<sup>7</sup>

We find another incredible instance recorded by Rabbi Shimon Huberband zt"l Hy"d (1909-1942), the leading chronicler of religious life in the "Oneg Shabbos" archives in the Warsaw ghetto. He describes how — despite a ban on shechita (ritual slaughter), which was a capital offense — a clandestine operation of kosher slaughter continued in basements at night by candlelight.<sup>8</sup>

Many Jews continued to observe halacha to the best of their ability despite the obvious limitations. This is illustrated by two questions published in the responsa of Rabbi Sinai Adler (born 1928) regarding his time in the Terezinstat ghetto. Prisoners were often given horse meat at a meal, which they ate for life preservation; must they wait subsequently until eating milk if they could? Due to a curfew imposed on the ghetto, people were forced to conduct their Pesach seder in the afternoon before sunset. Did they fulfill their obligation?<sup>9</sup>

Many rabbis provided spiritual leadership during this time of crisis in the ghetto. Rabbi Menachem Ziemba zt"l Hy"d (1883-1943) was known as the "Prager Ilui" (genius from Praga, Poland) and a leading rabbinic figure among European Jews. Until his death during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on Shabbat Chol Hamoed Pesach 1943, he was a leading force of Torah study and Jewish life in the Warsaw Ghetto. His incredible activities are

described in the diary of Dr. Hillel Seidman zt"l (1915-1995), who wrote:

*Throughout the many vicissitudes of the Ghetto, Rav Ziemba's apartment remained a source of light, warmth, and encouragement. He had to move house five times — either because of the contraction of the Ghetto or for his own safety — but always his home was full of people seeking advice or reassurance. They were not disappointed. The wisdom and unshakeable trust of generations was distilled in Rav Menachem's personality; with his genius, he had little difficulty in finding the apt phrase suitable for each petitioner and every occasion. All his sentiments were rooted in Torah sources and reflected the eternal truths. He combined the ice-cold logic and clear vision of the Lithuanian lamdan with all the fire and warmth of Polish Chasidim, fusing the mussar and perspective of Rebbe Yisrael Salanter with the sharpness of Kotzk chasidus. The Nazi terror did not break him; he remained a beacon of light amid the buffeting storm...*

*Even during those terrible months of from July to September 1942, when the deportations accelerated to a frenetic pace, he never ceased his continual Torah study nor stopped producing new Torah insights. During our oppressive plight, he drew his strength and inspiration from the Torah...*

*I remember the Sukkos of 1942. Under extreme danger, Rav Menachem broke open the roof of his apartment to construct a primitive sukkah. True, it was a tiny sukkah, but thousands of people passed through. On erev Sukkos I received three esrogim from Switzerland. Naturally, I brought them all straight to Rav Menachem Ziemba ... Immediately, the news spread, hundreds of Chasidim and yeshivah bachurim crawled through*



Rabbi Menachem Ziemba Hy"d

*attics, tunnels, and cellars to perform the precious mitzvah...*

*He visited the clandestine yeshivos in Nalewki, Nowolpie, and Mila Streets — testing the yeshivah bachurim and spurring them to greater achievements. In the Mila Street Yeshivah, they would learn right through the night. Outside panic reigned, no one knew what the unnatural lulls signified, everybody feared what the morrow would bring. The gedolei Torah, Rav Menachem Ziemba and his talmidim, ignored this bitter reality to soar to the spiritual heights of Torah and yiras Hashem.<sup>10</sup>*

At this same time, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira zt"l Hy"d (1888-1943), the Rebbe of Piaseczno, delivered Shabbat sermons in the Warsaw ghetto to his disciples.<sup>11</sup> He taught Torah teachings to his downtrodden audience, combining traditional Chassidic teachings with messages about contemporary suffering and put these words to paper that survived the ghetto's destruction and were found by a Polish construction worker in December 1950. In one drasha, he reminds his suffering listeners not to become callous to the suffering of others:

*We need to awaken in ourselves compassion for other Jews ... We*

must not habituate to Jewish suffering, meaning the increase in difficulties should not obscure or dull the compassion for Jews ... And this is the issue that appears in the Gemara Megillah 14b that when King Yoshiyahu was in a time of difficulty he sent to Chuldah the prophetess although Yirmiyahu the prophet was in that generation since women are compassionate.<sup>12</sup>

From these examples and many others we learn that devout Jews continued to observe the Torah and rabbis continued to encourage and teach Torah through this period.

### Concentration Camps

Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its satellites established over 40,000 camps and other incarceration camps throughout Europe.<sup>13</sup> Yet despite these ever intensifying hardships, many Jews continued to hold to their Torah observance.

Rabbi Chaim Yitzchak Yerucham zt"l Hy"d (1864-1942),<sup>14</sup> one of the leading rabbinic authorities of Galicia, was asked by someone who had eaten non-Kosher food in a קאנצענטראציעניס לאגער (concentration camp) if the inmate required teshuva for this violation (*Shu"t Bircas Chaim* #42). The questioner was obviously so committed to his Torah observance that he was concerned about the effects of this unusual circumstance after the fact. Another example of

incredible aspirational commitment to halacha is found in the following question posed to Rabbi Ephraim Oshry zt"l (1914-2003), a rabbi in Kovno, whose multi-volume responsa — *Sheelot Uteshuvot Mimamakim* — has become synonymous with the world of Holocaust and halacha:

*It was common for the cursed murderers ym"sh to lead the forced laborers to work in the dark of night before daybreak such that it was impossible to don Tefillin before leaving to work. They would work throughout the day into the night. There were those among the workmen who mustered the courage to clandestinely wear Tefillin as they walked once the day broke; however, one time the Germans caught one of the laborers while he was wearing Tefillin walking to work. After they tortured him with all types of torture they were not satisfied until they lacerated a cross into his left bicep — the place of the Tefillin — so that any time he were to expose his arm to don Tefillin people would see this sign of disgrace embedded in his arm. And I was asked if it were permitted for him to place a bandage over this disgraceful sign and place the Tefillin on top of the bandage so that onlookers would think that he had a wound on his bicep; does this constitute a violation of the laws of Tefillin [chatzitzah]?<sup>15</sup>*

Perhaps even greater than this individual's heroic commitment to the initial performance of the mitzvah of Tefillin is his rededication to the mitzvah after the unimaginable abuse he had suffered.

There were, of course, many who did not follow this path of observance and many who struggled. On the night of the seder in the Kunin concentration camp, Rabbi Yehoshua Moshe Aaronson zt"l (1910-1993) gave voice to this challenge (*Alei Meroros*, p.145):

*When I concluded the recitation of Kiddush and arrived at the bracha of shehechyanu, we all broke out sobbing, which continued for around a half hour. I spoke with those around and asked, is this not a blessing in vain, when the seder is filled with tears and sadness instead of celebrating the festival of freedom with happiness and elevation?*

### Death Camps

The Germans established six killing centers in Poland to execute their final solution. Even in these places — the literal shadow of death — many Jews demonstrated their commitment to Hashem.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau relays in his autobiography that his father, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau, zt"l Hy"d (1892-1942), led the members of his communities of Piotrkow and Presov to the gas chambers in Treblinka with the words of Shema and Vidui (*Out of the Depths*, p.14).

Ya'akov Gabai, a Greek Jew and member of the Auschwitz *sonderkommando* (the men responsible for transferring bodies from the gas chambers to the crematoria), reported about a group



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[www.yutorah.org/search/?s=holocaust+responsa](http://www.yutorah.org/search/?s=holocaust+responsa)

of Polish *sonderkommando* who had a break from work on September 26, 1944, which was erev Yom Kippur. They organized siddurim and davening for Yom Kippur in their barracks above the crematoria (*We Wept Without Tears*, p. 200).

Just ten days earlier in Auschwitz, camp authorities separated one thousand boys in a designated barrack for death on Rosh Hashana. Somehow they knew that Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Meisels zt”l of Veitzin was secretly hiding a shofar and sent word asking him to sound the shofar for them in their condemned barrack. He deliberated and decided that even though it was against normative halacha as it endangered his own life, he must go and sound the shofar for these boys. He describes the scene:

*There is not a writer or poet in the entire world who can portray my feelings as I entered the sealed barracks. It was only due to the miracle of G-d that my heart did not burst in anguish when I saw before me the bitter sea of tear-stung eyes. All of the children were screaming and crying terribly with burning tears and raised voices that ascended up to the heart of heaven. And they all pressed forward to kiss my hand, my clothing, and any place that they could touch me. They cried out these simple, but heart wrenching words:*

*“Rebbe, Rebbe! Oh! Mercy, have mercy!” Many of them I knew; they had been my students or my congregants. When I began reciting the verse Min Hameitzar, “From the straits did I call upon G-d,” they interrupted and begged me to say a few words before the shofar service. Too agitated by their overwhelming sorrow to speak, I was unable to move my lips or force my tongue to speak. In addition, I was afraid of the delay. It was getting late, the sun was setting, and the SS men could arrive at any moment.<sup>16</sup>*

## Post War

The end of the war dawned a new challenge for the survivors: rebuilding their shattered lives. One of the most active rabbinic leaders in postwar Europe was Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam, the Klausenberger Rebbe zt”l (1905-1994). One example of his unceasing advocacy for the physical and material lives of the survivors occurred in a remarkable, historic event.

On September 10, 1945, this Yiddish speaking survivor, clad in a tear-soaked tallit, spoke with the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower during Eisenhower’s visit to the DP camp in Feldafing, Germany. That date was Yom Kippur—the first after liberation. The Klausenberger’s request was a set of arba minim (four species) for Sukkot, which were flown to Feldafing from Italy under Eisenhower’s instructions. The previous night, the Klausenberger addressed his fellow survivors with an incredible conversation:

*After Kol Nidrei, the Rebbe went to stand next to the open ark and began to speak, directing his words toward Heaven.*

*Crying bitterly, the Rebbe spoke not from the machzor in his hands but straight from his heart. In a wholly unorthodox manner he called out the words of Vidui: “Ashamnu, bagadnu (we have sinned, we have rebelled)...” Each word was inflected not as a statement but as a question:*

*“Did we sin? Did we rebel?” Almost accusatorily, the Rebbe asked, “Did we really sin? Did we really rebel? Did we, chas veshalom, rebel against You and fail to remain faithful? Gazalnu — did we steal? From whom did we steal in Auschwitz and Muldorf? Was there anybody to steal from?” ...*

*Word by word, the Rebbe dismissed each*

*and every alleged sin of the survivors. “We did not commit evil acts. We did not sin willfully! This vidui was not written for us,” he concluded, closing his machzor. His congregation stood in shock.*

*“But we are guilty of sins that are not written in the machzor. We sinned in our faith and trust in our Creator. Did we not doubt Hashem out of despair and hopelessness in the camps? When we recited Shema at night, we hoped it would be our last HaMapil, that the end of our suffering would come. How many times did we pray, ‘Master of the Universe, I have no more strength. Take my soul so I will not have to recite Modeh Ani anymore’? And when the sun rose and we were obligated to thank Hashem for ‘returning my soul with great mercy,’ we were consumed with anger and rage. When we removed the corpses from the barracks, weren’t we jealous of those lucky people who had died?*

*“This is how we have sinned. We sinned with a lack of faith and trust. We must beat our chests and admit our sins. We must ask the Almighty to restore our faith and trust in Him. ‘Trust in God forever.’ ‘Trust in Him at all times, nation! Pour your hearts out before Him.’”<sup>17</sup>*

It is difficult to even imagine the level of emunah with which the Klausenberger lived, after having lost his wife and eleven children during the war.

Tragically, the scars of the war did not heal thereafter, and for some survivors it would never come in their lifetime. A halachic expression of this reality is found in a letter of Rabbi Yaakov Mordechai Breisch zt”l (1896-1976), a leading halachic authority, who escaped to Switzerland after he had been arrested and beaten in his community in Desburg, Germany

in 1933. In this responsum Rabbi Breisch is responding to the inquiry of a rabbi in New York, who turned to him for guidance in the following heartbreaking case:

*A G-d fearing man cries before [the rabbi] about when he was walking [on a death march] with his younger brother Hy”d. When they sat down he told his [younger] brother that he [the younger brother] could sleep a little bit and he [the older brother] would watch over him to wake him. Yet as the respite lasted longer, he [the older brother] also nodded off. Suddenly, he heard the shout of “laus, laus” meaning it was time to continue moving. Yet the older brother was still not clear-headed and amidst the confusion he ran to the place in line he had previously held. When he remembered his brother it was impossible to return to him without endangering his life, and from then on his brother’s memory has been lost, as it is clear to him that they [the Germans] killed him. And now it is close to thirteen years that he has pains of guilt over this, and his soul is troubled, so he turned to the rabbi asking if he requires atonement for this or not.<sup>18</sup>*

This question is an example of how even those who were broken by the Holocaust continued to seek a connection to Hashem in coming to terms with their experiences.

## Coda

These spiritual heroes inspire each of us to strengthen our bond with

Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Their love for Hashem, evident through their devotion and commitment, can inspire us to deepen our connection and love of Hashem and our connection with Him.

While the Holocaust and its attendant theological questions remain unanswered in this world, Rabbi Yehuda Amital zt”l (1924-2010), a Romanian teenager who survived the war in a labor camp and later became Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion, reminds us to continue to remain connected to Hashem:

*I turn to the Master of the world and plead: Look upon Your children; after all this, they still continue to pray! Believe me, on the Yamim Nora’im it was difficult for me to say, “You have chosen us from all the nations; You have loved us and desired us.” But I said it, and I continue to say it.<sup>19</sup>*

## Endnotes

1 The initial Knesset proclamation that created Yom Hashoah in 1951 acknowledged the heroism of active resistance, while its current formal name includes the second type of heroism, hence the title: Yom Hazikaron Lashoah V’ligvurah.

2 After Kristallnacht, Rabbi Wohlgemuth was sent to Dachau. After his release he escaped to the United States, where he settled in Boston, teaching Biur Tefillah in Maimonides Day School.

3 Introduction to *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*, Rabbi Wohlgemuth’s published insights into Tefillah.

4 Rabbi Kirschbaum zt”l Hy”d was born in Poland and served as a rabbi in Frankfurt,

Germany before the war. During the war he was in Belgium, and was subsequently transported to Auschwitz, where he was murdered in 1942.

5 After the murder of his wife and seven children the Veitzener Rav survived Auschwitz and emigrated to America, where he established a Torah community in Chicago.

6 Rabbi Shimon Huberband zt”l Hy”d, the chronicler of religious life in the Warsaw ghetto, remarked that with the creation of the ghetto, a new kosher eruv was in place.

7 “A Diary of the Nazi Ghetto in Vilna,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science Vol. VIII*, pp. 30-31. The diary of Herman Kruk also survived the war, and it is fascinating to compare the entries of Kruk, a secular leader of the Vilna community, with those of Kalmanovitch, a religious personality.

8 *Kiddush Hashem* p. 232.

9 *Dvar Sinai*, pp. 12-13.

10 *The Warsaw Ghetto Diaries*, pp. 346-349.

11 Rabbi Shapira zt”l Hy”d survived the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and was murdered near the Trawniki labor camp in November 1943.

12 *Aish Kodesh, Parshat Chukat 5701/ July 5, 1941.*

13 <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007872>.

14 Rabbi Yerucham zt”l Hy”d was the Av Beit Din of Altestat before his death in the Sambor ghetto on Sukkot 1942.

15 *Shu”t Mimamakim*, vol. 1 #26.

16 Introduction to *Shaar Machmadim*.

17 *The Klausenberger Rebbe: The War Years*, pp. 185-189.

18 *Sheelot UTeshuvot Chelkat Yaakov* 143.

19 Based on a *Sicha* of Rav Amital zt”l on Asara B’tvet 2012, translated by Karen Fish. <http://etzion.org.il/en/you-have-loved-us-and-desired-us>.



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