Understanding the History of the Holocaust II

Jewish Resistance, Miracles & Righteous Gentiles

In the first Morasha shiur on the Holocaust, we developed a rudimentary understanding of the horrors of the Holocaust and its irrevocable impact on the Jewish people. We will now turn our attention to some of the glimmers of hope that appeared during those dark days.

It is important to dispel the myth that Jews went to their deaths passively, “like lambs to the slaughter.” For reasons that will be mentioned below, Jewish resistance was often spiritual rather than physical; the manner in which they retained their human spirit, and even their Jewish spirit, demonstrates strength of character that we can barely imagine. Most of the stories of Jewish courage were lost with their heroes. Some have been passed on to us. It is our duty to remember these stories, and internalize their messages.

Furthermore, while the Holocaust was a time of unimaginable suffering and darkness for the Jewish people, many of those who survived (and even those who ultimately did not) experienced moments of salvation that were nothing short of miraculous. Stretched beyond the limits of physical endurance and facing the merciless, overwhelming brutality of the Nazis, many Jews found that their lives were saved in the most improbable ways. The history of the Holocaust is replete with such miracles, evidence that God was still with us even during that time of suffering.

Finally, it is important to mention some of the non-Jewish heroes who risked their own lives to save Jews from certain death. Even at a time in history when the entire world seemed to have turned against the Jewish people, there were still isolated individuals who demonstrated both mercy and courage by extending themselves to save Jews.

In this class, we will discuss the following:

☞ Did Jews really go to their death “like lambs to the slaughter”?
☞ How did Jews resist the Nazis?
☞ What signs of Divine intervention and assistance were present during the Holocaust?
☞ How was heroism manifested during the Holocaust?
☞ How did righteous gentiles risk their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust?
SECTION I. JEWISH RESISTANCE

PART A. OBSTACLES TO PHYSICAL RESISTANCE

One of the questions commonly asked about the Holocaust is how it was possible for the Nazis to murder six million victims and imprison and torture many others. Why didn’t the Jews fight back? First of all, it must be noted that there were incidences of physical resistance to the Nazi killing machine, which are generally well-documented. These include the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the Jewish partisans, the escape from Sobibor, the attempted escape from Treblinka, and the rebellion of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz. These resistance efforts were undertaken in the face of tremendous obstacles. The Germans possessed a massive, powerful army, while the Jews were defenseless civilians. The Germans also enjoyed overwhelming support from the local populations of the countries they invaded, while the rest of the world turned a blind eye to their acts of vicious persecution (as discussed in the previous Morasha class on the Holocaust events). In addition, the Germans employed many other tactics to prevent resistance movements from developing. The following quote discusses some of the main obstacles to any form of resistance.

1. Resistance During the Holocaust, pamphlet from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum – A variety of obstacles prevented resistance movements from forming.

Many factors made resistance to the Nazis both difficult and dangerous. The form and timing of resistance were generally shaped by various and often formidable obstacles. Obstacles to resistance included:

Superior, armed power of the Germans. The superior, armed power of the Nazi regime posed a major obstacle to the resistance of mostly unarmed civilians from the very beginning of the Nazi takeover of Germany. This was particularly true of the German army during World War II. It is important to remember that at the outbreak of war in September 1939, Poland was overrun in a few weeks. France, attacked by Germany on May 10, 1940, fell only six weeks later. Clearly, if two powerful nations with standing armies could not resist the onslaught of the Germans, the possibilities of success were narrow for mostly unarmed civilians who had limited access to weapons.

German tactic of “collective responsibility.” This retaliation tactic held entire families and communities responsible for individual acts of armed and unarmed resistance. In Dolhyhnow, near the old Lithuanian capital of Vilna, the entire ghetto population was killed after two young boys escaped
and refused to return. In the ghetto of Bialystok, Poland, the Germans shot 120 Jews on the street after Abraham Melamed shot a German policeman. The Germans then threatened to destroy the whole ghetto if Melamed did not surrender. Three days later, he turned himself in to avoid retaliation in the ghetto. At the Treblinka killing center in occupied Poland, camp guards shot 26 Jews after four prisoners slipped through the barbed wire in winter 1942. After Meir Berliner, a Jewish prisoner at Treblinka, killed Max Bialas, a high ranking Nazi officer, guards executed more than 160 Jews in retaliation …

**Isolation of Jews and lack of weapons.** Jewish victims of Nazism faced an additional, specific obstacle to resistance. Jews were isolated and unarmed. Even if individuals had the physical strength, the will, and the opportunity to escape from imprisonment in a Nazi ghetto or camp, they faced great difficulties in finding hiding places on the outside, food, and a sympathetic local population willing to risk safety in favor of assistance. Most Jews could not blend easily into non-Jewish communities because of various differences of accent or language, religious customs, and physical appearance, including the circumcision of male Jews. In many occupied regions of eastern Europe, local populations, including many peasants in forest areas where Jews often had the best chances of hiding, were either hostile to Jews or indifferent to their fate. Local populations themselves were living under harsh conditions of occupation, subject to food rationing and many forms of German terror including murder, roundups for forced labor, and deportation to concentration camps. Civilians who did help Jewish escapees did so under penalty of death.

**Secrecy and deception of deportations.** The speed, secrecy, and deception that the Germans and their collaborators used to carry out deportations and killings were intended to impede resistance. Millions of victims, rounded up either prior to mass shootings in occupied Soviet territory or for deportation to Nazi killing centers where they were gassed, often did not know where they were being sent. Rumors of death camps were widespread, but Nazi deception and the human tendency to deny bad news in the face of possible harm or death took over as most Jews could not believe the stories. There was no precedence for such a monstrous action as the planned annihilation of a whole people as official government policy. The German or collaborating police forces generally ordered their victims to pack some of their belongings, thus reinforcing the belief among victims that they were being “resettled” in labor camps. When, as late as summer 1944, almost one-half million Jews were deported to Auschwitz from German-occupied Hungary, many had not even heard of the camp. To further the deception for those Jews left behind after the first wave of deportations, many deportees at Auschwitz were forced to write postcards to friends and relatives just before they were gassed: “Arrived safely. I am well.”

**PART B. SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE**

While it was exceedingly difficult for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust to organize any sort of physical rebellion against the Nazis, there are countless examples, great and small, of their resistance to the Nazis’ efforts to break their spirits. The attack of Nazi Germany against the Jews was not limited to their bodies. It was just as much an attack against their souls. The Jews were dehumanized, degraded to a degree that we cannot begin to imagine, and were denied every right a human being can claim. In fact, the Nazis deliberately set out on a campaign to destroy the Jews’ spirit, in addition to destroying their bodies. The Nazis’ agenda was to ruin their victims on every level: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Yet, in many cases, the Jews’ spirits were not broken. While the cases of physical resistance to the Nazi machine are few, the cases of spiritual resistance cannot be quantified, even known. This resistance was often silent; it was the resistance of a Jew intent on keeping his dignity; it was the sanctification of life, and the sanctification of God’s Name in death.

In this section we will quote a number of stories of such spiritual resistance. These anecdotes are a mere
glimpse at the great Jewish spirit that was not quelled; yet it is possible that thousands, tens of thousands, millions of innocent victims who did not survive had the same courage, the same boundless faith, and the same will to live. We will never know what incredible tales they have taken with them.

The following story is quoted in numerous publications, including Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, *From Darkness to Light* [Hebrew], *Path Through the Ashes* (Artscroll/Mesorah), and others. The version below is taken from Yaffa Eliach, *The Holocaust and New Hasidic Tales*, published in Tradition 20(3), 1982, p. 228. It is the story of how a great Jew did not allow his suffering at the hands of the Nazis to diminish his pride at being a member of the Chosen People.

1. **The Holocaust Haggadah, Targum Press, Inc – The Chosen People.**

   *The Passover Haggadah says: “Asher bachar banu mikol am” – Who chose us out of all peoples.*

   The Klausenberger Rebbe was taken as part of a slave-labor group from Auschwitz to Warsaw to dismantle the bombed-out buildings. The work was done at a furious pace and consisted of carrying heavy boulders and beams. Many people died of exhaustion.

   One day, while the rebbe and his fellow prisoners were working on top of a building, a tremendous torrent of rain came down on them. Nevertheless, the Nazis drove them mercilessly to continue their work. One of the poor, exhausted, and completely drenched victims exclaimed in pain to the rebbe, “Are you going to continue to say ‘You [God] have chosen us’ – and rejoice that we are the chosen nation?”

   The Klausenberger Rebbe answered, “Until this day I did not say ‘You have chosen us’ with the proper devotion. But from today, when I say, ‘You have chosen us from among the nations,’ I will say it with much more fervor. I’ll be infinitely ecstatic.”

   When the rebbe saw the astonished look on the man’s face, he explained to him, “If it weren’t for the fact that God has chosen us, then I would also be like the Nazis. It’s better for me to be in my situation than to be one of them, God forbid. Happy is my lot!”

   The Klausenberger Rebbe related further, “In Warsaw there was a Jew from Lithuania with us whose situation was much better than ours because he was an expert in metalworking, which made him very important to the SS. He was allowed to go around freely, and was given extra food.

   “One day this man sneaked into my cabin and said, ‘I came to discuss with you a point in Jewish law. In my work, I have to violate Shabbat by transgressing Torah prohibitions. I think it is better to be transferred to the group that has to carry the heavy logs and boulders, which is not a Torah prohibition but a rabbinic decree.’

   “When I asked him how he was going to accomplish this, he said, ‘I have already made preparations to burn my hands with scalding water so that I will be unable to continue my delicate work. Then they will have to transfer me to the other work groups.’

   “One has to realize,” continued the rebbe, “that carrying the boulders meant certain death. Many were not able to hold out for more than a few days. In vain, I tried to convince him not to put himself into such danger. But he insisted that he did not want to transgress so many Torah prohibitions. With great difficulty I was able to persuade him that as a metalworker he was able to save the lives of many other Jews. Only then did he relent. Certainly seeing such a Jew strengthened in us the joy of ‘You have chosen us.’”

The Nazis often forced the Jews to undergo various brutal torments with the express intention of
shaming them, degrading them, and causing them to lose their feelings of humanity. Yet often, the Jewish spirit was not broken by these attempts, and the Jews retained their pride and dignity—which, under such circumstances, certainly constitutes true heroism.


Dignity in response to attempted acts of physical and spiritual degradation was dramatically demonstrated in Lublin towards the end of 1939. The German commander had forcibly assembled the Jews in an empty field on the outskirts of the city and ordered them in jest to sing a Hassidic melody. Hesitantly, someone began the traditional melody Lomir zich iberbeten, Avinu Shebashomayim (Let us become reconciled, Our Father in Heaven).

The song, however, did not arouse much enthusiasm among the frightened masses. Immediately, Glovoznik (the commander) ordered his hooligans to attack the Jews since they refused to fully comply with his wishes.

When the angry outburst against the Jews continued, an anonymous voice broke through the turmoil with a powerful and piercing cry, Mir velen sei iberleben, Avinu Shebashomayim (We will outlive them, O Father in Heaven)! Instantly, the song took hold among the entire people, until it catapulted the people into a stormy and feverish dance. The assembled were literally swept up by the entrancing melody full of dveikut (spiritual connection), which had now been infused with new content of faith and trust.

The intended derision was turned into a disaster for the bewildered Nazis, forcing the commander Glovoznik to order a halt to the paradoxical spectacle.

The Nazis subjected the Jews to such severe pain and privation that one might have expected the victims to use any recourse to alleviate their suffering. Yet despite their best efforts, many Jews retained their humanity and nobility, representing a true defeat of the Nazi agenda.

3. Rabbi Menachem Nissel, audio shiur – Heroism during the Holocaust did not necessarily mean physical resistance. Heroism often meant saving the life of another, even at the greatest cost.

At the former location of the Warsaw ghetto is a large sculpture known as the Rappaport memorial, dedicated to the fallen fighters of the Warsaw ghetto. It is a massive granite block. On one side are images of the heroic fighters of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, sculpted as incredibly powerful, muscular human beings. On the other side are images of weak-looking elderly men and women, along with children, being herded into the gas chambers.

An elderly Holocaust survivor with a fiery disposition once explained the significance of part of the memorial to me. Part of the memorial depicts a grandmother holding a child and walking toward the gas chamber. How did a grandmother end up carrying a child toward the gas chamber? The Nazis brought entire families and communities in cattle cars to the entrances to the concentration camps, where the Jews were immediately divided into two lines. The line on the right consisted of strong, youthful individuals: those who were fit for work. The line on the left consisted of people who were weaker: children, the sick, the elderly, and pregnant women. If the people who arrived there had a chance to take stock of what was going on around them, it would have been relatively simple for them to realize that the people on the right were being spared from death and sent for slave labor, while the people on the left were being sent to their deaths.

The only type of healthy-looking person who would also be sent to the left was a mother holding a child. How did a grandmother come to be holding a child? When the cattle cars pulled up to the
concentration camp after days of travel, after days of deprivation of food and water, and the grandmother stumbled out of the cattle car, she would have seen the two lines of people and understood what was taking place. She would have seen her own daughter, the child’s mother, who was clutching her child, and she would have realized that the only way to save her daughter’s life was to grab her grandchild and hold the grandchild close to herself, thereby allowing her daughter to be sent to the right, to life.

“So I ask you,” this elderly survivor concluded, “who were the real heroes of the Holocaust? Were they the people depicted on the front of the memorial, the ones with guns and knives and huge muscles? Or were they the elderly people on the back of the memorial, whose last actions were the heroic moves that they took in order to save their family members from death?”

PART C. RESISTANCE IN CONTINUED OBSERVANCE

As much as the Nazis fought a war against the Jewish people, they also fought bitterly against the Jewish religion. They did everything in their power to strip every Jew under their control of any trace of mitzvah observance. Consequently, even the observance of the slightest precept of the Torah in the concentration camps entailed tremendous self-sacrifice and meant risking one’s life. Yet there are countless stories of Jews who did, indeed, risk life and limb to continue their observance of the Torah and its commandments.


“I will tell you another story,” said Rabbi Israel Spira to his student Baruch Baer Singer, “a story that took place in the Janowska Road Camp. Janowska was one of those camps about which, if one is to recall the events that took place during one year, one can fill the pages with tales of heroism, suffering and death. Not one book, but ten volumes. And even then, it would just be a drop in the ocean.

“Many have asked me to publish the stories of Janowska in a book. I told them I am not writing new books. It would be sufficient if we read and studied the existing books. But this particular story is a duty to record. It is a mitzvah to tell it, for it is a tale about the devotion and sacrifice of a daughter of Israel.

“One morning in Janowska, I was standing and sawing wood with another katzetnik (camp inmate). To humiliate us as much as possible, I was given as a partner a very short man. As you see, thank God, I am not among the short ones.

“It made the wood sawing both a difficult task and a laughable sight. With each pull of the saw my partner would stretch out and stand on the tips of his toes, and I would bend down till my aching, swollen feet were bleeding. And the Germans stood by and watched our misery and suffering with delight.

“One morning, on Hoshana Rabbah, as we were sawing wood, the wind carried in our direction piercing, tormented cries such as I had never heard before, even in the Janowska hell. The desperate clamor was coming closer and closer as if the weeping was filling up the entire universe and drowning it with painful tears.

“‘It is a children’s Aktion, little angels from the entire vicinity of Drohobycz, Borislov, Lvov, Stryj, Stanislav, and others were brought here to meet their Maker,’ said a katzetnik who passed by, pushing a wheelbarrow, without even glancing in our direction. I thought the cries would shake the world’s foundation.

“We continued sawing the wood as our eyes became heavier and heavier with tears. Suddenly, just...
next to us, I heard the voice of a woman. 'Jews, have mercy upon me and give me a knife.' In front of us was standing a woman, pale as a sheet. Only her eyes were burning with a strange fire, I thought that she wanted to commit suicide. I looked around, and since I saw no Germans in sight, I said to her, 'Why are you in such a rush to get to the World of Truth? We will get there sooner or later. What difference can one day make?'

"Dog, what did you say to the woman?" A tall young German who appeared from nowhere demanded an answer, while swinging his rubber truncheon above my head. 'The woman asked for a knife. I explained to her that we Jews are not permitted to take our lives. For our lives are entrusted in the hands of God.' I hastily added, 'And I hope that you, too, will spare our lives.'

The German did not respond to my words. He turned to the woman and demanded an explanation from her. She answered curtly, 'I asked for a knife.'

"As she was talking, she kept examining the German with her feverish eyes. Suddenly her eyes stopped wandering. Her gaze was fixed on the top pocket of the German's uniform. The shape of a knife was clearly visible through the pocket.

"Give me that pocket knife!" she ordered the German in a commanding voice. The German, taken by surprise, handed the knife to the woman.

"She bent down and picked up something. Only then did I notice a bundle of rags on the ground near the sawdust. She unwrapped the bundle. Amidst the rags on a snow-white pillow was a newborn babe, asleep. With a steady hand she opened the pocket-knife and circumcised the baby. In a clear, intense voice she recited the blessing of the circumcision, 'Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us by Your commandments and have commanded us to perform the circumcision.'

"She straightened her back, looked up to the heavens, and said, 'God of the Universe, You have given me a healthy child. I am returning to you a wholesome, kosher Jew.' She walked over to the German, gave him back his blood-stained knife, and handed him her baby on his snow-white pillow.

"Amidst a veil of tears, I said to myself then that this mother's circumcision will probably shake the foundations of heaven and earth. Next to Abraham on Mount Moriah, where can you find a greater act of faith than this Jewish mother's?"

The rabbi looked at his student with tear-filled eyes and said, "Since liberation, each time I am honored at a circumcision to be a Sandak (godfather), it is my custom to tell this particular story."

Historical records from the Holocaust demonstrate that even in the midst of their suffering, many Jews clung to the Torah and its laws, refusing to succumb to the Nazi campaign to break their bodies and souls. Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, a rabbi who was imprisoned in the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania, recorded a large number of halachic queries that he received during the years of horror. The queries were written upon scraps of paper and buried in tin cans, which he retrieved after surviving the afflictions of the Holocaust and published in book form. These painful questions illustrate the depths of suffering that the Jews experienced, but they also demonstrate the nobility of a people that refused to surrender its allegiance to God and His Torah. The following excerpts from Rabbi Oshry's book reflect the tremendous sacrifices that Jews made to continue observing the Torah's precepts even under the most abysmal conditions.
2. **Responsa from the Holocaust, Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, Targum Press, 1983, p. 49 – Reading of Shema by slave laborers.**

During the winter months, the labor in the airfield began when it was still dark, long before the proper time for reading Shema, and ended very late at night. I was asked how the laborers should fulfill the mitzvah of reading the morning Shema. During work itself, it was impossible for them to concentrate and read the entire Shema properly, since the Germans constantly approached them with work orders and commands, compelling the Jewish laborers to interrupt their reading of the Shema. They could only read it in fragments. Nor could they wait to read the Shema during the lunch break since the break came after midday, when the time for Shema was long over.

3. **Ibid., p. 22 – Eventual danger to life.**

Beginning Elul 5701 – September 1941 – the Jews of Kovno were compelled to work in the airfield next to the city by the Germans who ordered the ghetto Jews to provide 1,000 workers daily. Every one of the slave laborers was allowed one bowl of non-kosher soup as his daily ration plus 100 grams of bread. Many of the laborers understandably refused to defile themselves with this non-kosher soup. But after they grew weak from hunger and from the pressures of hard labor, a number of them came to me in the pre-Yom Kippur days of 5702 – late September 1941 – and asked if they might be permitted to eat the soup since their lives would ultimately be endangered if they did not eat it.

Since medical experts agreed that the sustenance that was provided for the Jews was insufficient for them to survive, the rabbi ruled it was therefore permissible for them to consume non-kosher food. But the fact that in the midst of their travails, these Jews still sought to uphold the laws of kashrut, demonstrates a heroic victory against the Nazis.

Some Jews even found sparks of sanctity in the very oppression from which they were suffering. When they were killed by the Nazis, they turned their deaths into opportunities to sanctify God's Name.

4. **Moshe Prager, Eleh Shelo Nikne'u, Vol. I, Bnei Brak, Israel: Netzach, 157-158, as recorded by the eyewitness, Rabbi Abraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer – Sanctifying God's Name prior to death.**

Rabbi Mendele Alter, the brother of the Gerer Rebbe, was among a group of Jews ordered to undress in Treblinka during the Summer of 1942. Realizing that these were his last moments the Rebbe pleaded desperately for a glass of water.

A Jewish guard usually noted for his cruelty to fellow Jews, was touched with the plea. He provided the water under the impression that the Rebbe wished to quench his thirst prior to death. Instead, the Rebbe used the glass of water to cleanse his hands, as an act of purification prior to Kiddush Hashem, urging his fellow Jews, “Let us say the vidui (confession) prior to death.”

Some Jews, even in the darkest and most oppressive conditions of the Holocaust, still derived strength and hope from the mitzvot they managed to observe. Finding even a glimmer of hope amidst their suffering is itself an incredible feat.

5. **Yaffa Eliach, Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust, pp. 16-20 – Seder Night at Bergen-Belsen: Tonight we have only matzah.**

The Rabbi of Bluzhov sat at the head of the table. He was surrounded by a group of young children and a few adults. The rabbi began to recite the Haggadah from memory. He uncovered the matzot, lifted the ceremonial plate, and began to tell the story of the Exodus. “This is the bread of affliction
that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. All who are hungered – let them come and eat, all who are needy – let them come and celebrate Passover. Now we are here; next year may we be in the land of Israel! Now we are slaves; next year may we be free men!"

The youngest of the children asked the Four Questions, his sweet childish voice chanting the traditional melody: “Why is this night different from all other nights? For on all other nights we eat either bread or matzah, but tonight only matzah.”

It was dark in the barracks. The moon’s silvery, pale glow was reflected on the pale faces. It was as if the tears that silently streamed down their cheeks were flowing toward the legendary angel with the huge jug of tears, which when filled to its brim would signal the end of human suffering. As is customary, the rabbi began to explain the meaning of Passover in response to the Four Questions.

But on that Seder Night in Bergen Belsen, the ancient questions of the Haggadah assumed a unique meaning. “Night,” said the rabbi, “means exile, darkness, suffering. Morning means light, hope, redemption. Why is this night different from all other nights? Why is this suffering, the Holocaust, different from all the previous sufferings of the Jewish people?” No one attempted to respond to the rabbi’s questions. Rabbi Israel Spira continued: “For on all other nights we eat either bread or matzah, but tonight only matzah. Bread is leavened; it has height. Matzah is unleavened and is totally flat. During all our previous sufferings, during all our previous nights in exile, we Jews had bread and matzah. We had moments of bread, of creativity and light, and moments of matzah, of suffering and despair. But tonight, the night of the Holocaust, we experience our greatest suffering. We have reached the depths of the abyss, the nadir of humiliation. Tonight we have only matzah, we have no moments of relief, not a moment of respite for our humiliated spirits … But do not despair, my young friends.”

The rabbi continued in a forceful voice filled with faith. “For this is also the beginning of our redemption. We are slaves who served Pharaoh in Egypt. Slaves in Hebrew are avadim; the Hebrew letters of the word avadim form an acronym for the Hebrew phrase: David, the son of Yishai, your servant, your Messiah. Thus, even in our state of slavery we find intimations of our eventual freedom through the coming of the Messiah. We who are witnessing the darkest night in history, the lowest moment of civilization, will also witness the great light of redemption, for before the great light there will be a long night, as was promised by our Prophets: ‘But it shall come to pass, that at evening time there shall be light’, and ‘The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.’ It was to us, my dear children, that our prophets have spoken, to us who dwell in the shadow of death, to us who will live to witness the great light of redemption.”

The Seder concluded. Somewhere above, the silvery glow of the moon was dimmed by dark clouds. The Rabbi of Bluzhov kissed each child on the forehead and reassured them that the darkest night of mankind would be followed by the brightest of all days. As the children returned to their barracks, slaves of a modern Pharaoh amidst a desert of mankind, they were sure that the sounds of the Messiah’s footsteps were echoing in the sounds of their own steps on the blood-soaked earth of Bergen Belsen.

Many Jews made a special effort to wear Tefillin, a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. The very way in which they performed the mitzvah, by sharing the mitzvah with their fellow Jews, showed they maintained the Jewish value of chesed.
6. Esther Farbstein, Hidden in Thunder, Vol. II, Mosad Harav Kook Publishers, pp. 428-429 – Despite their tremendous desire to wear the Tefillin, they performed the mitzvah quickly to enable others to fulfill the commandment as well.

A special demonstration of faith came from those who insisted on putting on Tefillin even in the concentration camps, something that was ostensibly impossible. Although Tefillin were one of the personal belongings that believing Jews took with them when they left their homes, they were all forced to throw them into a pile at the camp gate. Nevertheless, some Jews managed to smuggle Tefillin into a camp or retrieve them from the piles of clothing. They were guarded as a precious treasure and were put on in secret, making it hard to estimate the number of people involved. Each Jew who put on Tefillin, however, demonstrated a special bond with his Creator in the midst of hell. Three Rabbis – Rabbi Aronson, Rabbi Meisels, and the Klausenberger Rebbe – wrote down similar accounts of this in different parts of Auschwitz, none of them knowing about the others. Rabbi Aronson told of the long lines behind barracks whose inhabitants had a pair of Tefillin. Standing in line meant passing up an hour of sleep and a little hot “coffee.” He and Rabbi Meisels both described an interesting detail: the people put on the Tefillin quickly and recited only the first verse of the Shema so that others would also be able to do the mitzvah.

Especially moving testimonies have been recorded about Tefillin in the labor camps and around Gross-Rosen. In one case, a Jew redeemed the only Tefillin around in exchange for his last piece of bread. “Some fifty Jews prayed with these Tefillin, one after another, behind a living wall that hid the worshippers.” In the Dornhau camp the demand for Tefillin was so great that the Rabbi decided to separate the parts (the one for the head and the one for the arm), saying it was better to fulfill a partial mitzvah than none at all.

Private and even public prayer demonstrated the Jewish belief, that even in the darkest times, God deeply cares for us and hears our prayers.


Despite the general atmosphere, there was a group of tenacious Jews … simple Jews convinced of their belief, which they demonstrated daily, that everything that happened to us was carried out by a Supreme Power, even if we couldn't grasp this with our simple human minds. Out of that group, a group of worshippers formed, which at first was very small. Gradually, the group of worshippers who recited the prayers in a minyan everyday grew.

On more than one occasion, a comrade who had tended not to pray in the past was swept up by the melodies of the prayers. The sound reached him, the tune of the Friday night prayers, and cut him off briefly from the tragic circumstances … I used to run there, to that shore, to that corner where a few minyanim of Jews stood and prayed in supreme holiness. I drew light from there; I took a spark from there and fled with it to my bunk. Then I had a happy Shabbat night.

8. Ibid., pp. 423-426 – The importance of prayer was valued by all.

Rabbi Yehoshua Grunwald of Huszt tells of a “prayer book” written on a piece of paper, based partly on one prayer book that was in Auschwitz and partly on memory: “I recited the Shemoneh Esrei prayer from the written text, and everyone – some two thousand people – repeated it after me in a whisper, weeping bitterly.”

There were also women who dictated the text of the prayers as they remembered them from home. In Gross-Rosen, for instance, an old woman from Warsaw – the wife of a cantor – reconstructed the Rosh Hashanah prayers from memory. On the evening of the festival, after a long and exhausting day of labor, she recited the prayers aloud and the women around her repeated them word by word …
Even those who had difficulty praying showed respect for the Jews who clung to their faith. At most they regarded them with amazement, but they also gave them special protection so that they could continue praying – as if their prayers were also on behalf of those who could no longer pray.

PART D. THE COURAGE TO REBUILD

The heroism of the indomitable Jewish spirit did not end with the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945. After the end of the Holocaust, the survivors of Nazi atrocities faced a host of new, crushing challenges. Most of them were rootless, permanently displaced from their homes, and stripped of any property they had once owned. They were shattered and bereaved, having lost most or all of their families and friends. Their communities had been decimated, and they had nowhere left to go. Under such circumstances, it would be only natural for survivors to succumb to resignation and despair. Yet many of them found the courage to go on, to rebuild their lives and start new families, and even to give encouragement to other broken survivors. The level of heroism required for these efforts is certainly beyond our imagination.


When the war ended and the camp gates were opened – even before people realized the scope of the catastrophe – feelings of loneliness intensified. Jews discovered that their entire families had been wiped out. To overcome the pain of loneliness, many people wanted to get married, and within a few months a wave of weddings began. It was a manifestation not only of the need for closeness and family warmth, but of a sense of a mission to perpetuate the family and the nation and to take some form of revenge against the Germans, who had tried to wipe out all generations to come.

2. Rabbi Paysach Krohn, Along the Maggid's Journey, Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, p. 93 – Despite having lost his own wife and 11 children, the Klausenberger Rebbe brought solace to 87 orphaned girls in a displaced persons camp on Erev Yom Kippur.

On Erev Yom Kippur in 1947, the Klausenberger Rebbe [Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam (1905-1994)] was in his quarters in the D.P. camp preparing for the holiest day of the year. He was interrupted by a knock on the door. He went to open it, and standing there before him was a young girl with tears in her eyes.

“Rebbe, every year my father would bless me before Yom Kippur. My father was burned alive and I have no one to bless me.”

The Rebbe, who had lost his own wife and 11 children, invited the girl to come in and said, “My child, I will be your father.”

He put a handkerchief on her head, and with his holy hands he blessed her, emotionally and intently. The girl left the Rebbe’s quarters smiling and fortified.

A few minutes later a group of forlorn girls came to the Rebbe’s door. “We, too, would like to be blessed, Rebbe,” one of them said. “There is no one to bless us.”

Once again, with patience and tears, he blessed each of the girls. The news spread, and soon orphaned girls of the D.P camp were coming in droves. The Rebbe blessed every single one of them, 87 in all.
KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

❖ In the immediate aftermath of the War, many Jews felt a sense of shame at their own massacre, leading them to a general policy of silence concerning their war experiences. This shame stemmed from the criticism that Jews went to their deaths “like lambs to the slaughter.” In more recent times, many psychological studies have shown that the Jews who died, in spite of their large numbers, could have done very little against the Nazi killing machine. The fact that there were any uprisings – and there were several that we know of – is more incredible than their general absence.

❖ As survivors began to speak of their experiences, however, an entirely new type of resistance, no less courageous that the physical resistance they were denied, came to light: the spiritual resistance of the Jewish people. In spite of the Nazi attempt to deny them their very humanity, the Jews, in many thousands or millions of cases, were able to retain their human spirit. This was often achieved by clinging to their Jewish roots, those roots that the Nazis were determined to destroy.

❖ Two concepts, both without formal definition, were forever present among the Jews of the Holocaust. One was Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of God's name) in death; even as they succumbed to the Nazi murder machine, the Jews did not forget their Judaism. Countless testimonies speak of how Jews went to their death with the words of Kriat Shema (the Shema prayer) on their lips. The second was a concept new to Judaism, but not new to the Jewish spirit: Kiddush ha-Chayim, the sanctification of life. In spite of their horrific situation, a markedly small number of Jews chose to take their own lives. For as long as it was humanly possible – and sometimes even beyond what seemed possible – the Jews chose life, a life imbued with Jewish yearning under impossible circumstances. We cannot measure the worth of mitzvot fulfilled in the camps – Jews who lit Chanukah candles, Jews who fasted on Yom Kippur. All we can do is stand in awe of the Jewish spirit that would not be extinguished.

SECTION II. MIRACLES OF THE HOLOCAUST

The Klausenberger Rebbe once remarked that anyone who survived the Holocaust must have been accompanied throughout by two angels, one on his right and one on his left. In the terribly bleak circumstances of the Holocaust, any survival was miraculous. Thus, even in the terrible darkness of the Holocaust, some glimpses of light were seen. The miracles of the Holocaust years have special value for the Jewish people. Although they cannot mitigate the tragedy of the Holocaust, they serve as a demonstration of the continual Presence of God among His people. For reasons that only He can know, some individuals were plucked out of the Nazi vice, like fish out of the fisherman's net, and saved. The following stories are examples of incredible, life-saving miracles that took place during the Holocaust years.


He was the baker at my children’s summer camp … After our automobile accident, he came to visit me wearing his baker’s hat and white apron, with his sleeves rolled up. He carried with one hand, like a skillful waiter, an aluminum tray, and on it one of his artistically decorated cakes. In fine calligraphy, it wished my daughter Smadar and me a full and speedy recovery…

I told him that it was one of these strange cases when not being strapped in by seat belts had been advantageous. As the car rolled down the hill in the Poconos after its brakes failed, I had thrown
myself over my daughter to protect her from the caving-in roof and the seat's springs that rolled out from below.

“Don’t attribute it to the seat belts. It is rather the miracle of living in order to save someone very dear to you. Even if you had been strapped in with your seat belts, you would have torn them loose like Samson,” he said to me. Then, without stopping for my comment, he began to tell me his story.

“You see, I had a little sister who was the most beautiful person on earth in body and soul. There wasn’t a thing in the world that was too difficult for me to do for my sister. When the Germans occupied our town, we hid her for we knew that they would take her away with the rest of the young women. In the ghetto we worked very hard to provide food for an additional mouth. But we looked upon it as a special privilege. We all lived for her safety and well-being. The knowledge that she was safe and with us gave us the strength to go on living in the most difficult times. Even in the ghetto under the most horrible conditions, having her there made our little room seem like a palace. It was as if the Sabbath Queen was always dwelling among us.

“One day as we were returning home, a strange silence hung on the streets … the silence that follows death and Aktionen. The closer we got to our building, the more we could sense that something was wrong. When we got there, we discovered that the door to our room had been broken in, everything was looted, and my sister was gone! While avoiding our eyes, neighbors told us that she had been taken by the Gestapo. Without thinking, I began to run to the Gestapo. My mother begged me to return; she did not want to lose two children in one day. But I just continued to run.

“I entered the Gestapo building as if it was the most natural thing for a Jew to do. I was greeted by a young soldier at the desk. ‘What’s your wish, Jew, to be shot now? If you are in great haste, I can accommodate you.’

‘You took my sister,’ I said.

‘Who’s your sister?’

‘The beautiful girl you just brought in.’

‘That’s fascinating. Tell me, how do all ugly Jews have beautiful sisters?’

‘The soldier at the desk called in another Gestapo man from the next room. He briefed him.

‘So she’s your sister?’ he said to me while his eyes examined me from head to toe.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘What do you want?’

‘Give me back my sister.’

‘The German burst into wild laughter. ‘What strange ideas Jews have these days,’ he choked. ‘Jew, I will let your beautiful sister go on one condition. If right now you will grow hair on the palm of your hand.’

“I opened the palm of my hand – it was covered with black hair. The Gestapo man’s face twisted into a horrible grimace. He began to shout hysterically, ‘You Jewish satan, devil, take your sister and run before I machine-gun the two of you!’ Then he went to get her from another room and pushed her toward me, all the while continuing to scream. I grabbed my sister’s hand and with all our strength we began to run, never looking back. We stopped for only a moment at our home to tell our parents that we were alive, and then we fled to the forest. Never in my life did I run faster than on that day. I am sure that I would have been a world champion at all the Olympic running tournaments.”

When he finished this story, he opened his clenched fist. His palm was covered with a thick growth of black hair. I was so surprised that I could not utter a single word. I had known him for several years and never noticed it before. “You see,” he went on, “when I was a very young man, a boy, I worked in a factory. My hand was caught in a machine. It was a terrible accident. How they managed to save my shattered hand I still marvel till this day. As you can see, there is not a task I can’t perform with my
hand, from the most difficult, strenuous movement to the most delicate. Apparently, the skin that was grafted onto my palm was from a hairy part of my body. In my late teens, hair began to grow on the palm of my hand. Doctors tell me today that this is impossible, but the palm of my hand did not go to medical school.”


It was a cold autumn day; the skies covered with the perpetual cloud of ash that hovered daily over Auschwitz. A group of fifty young Yeshivah students were herded into the gas chambers, ostensibly for a cold shower. This was well enough into the history of Auschwitz that the cold truth of the cold showers was well known to the young men. They all knew that the nozzles would soon open and bathe them in a cascade of noxious fumes that would choke off their air supply and drain them of life.

The Nazi guards, gleefully awaiting the usual onset of panic, complete with frantic banging on the doors, desperate efforts to reach the sealed windows and futile clawing against bare walls, were surprised by this unique group. Just before the showers released their poison a young man addressed his friends. “Brothers,” he cried, “today is Simchat Torah, when the Jewish world rejoices having concluded their annual reading of the Torah. During our short lives we have tried to uphold the Torah to the best of our ability and now we have one last chance to do so. Before we die let us celebrate Simchat Torah one last time. We have nothing; no clothes to cover us or Torah with which to rejoice. But we have God Who is surely here among us today. So let us dance with God Himself before we return our souls to Him.”

With this he placed his hand on his fellow’s shoulder and fifty young men broke out in joyous dance; the song of “Vetaher libeinu leavdecha be’emet” (purify our hearts to serve you with sincerity), on their lips. The bewildered Nazis stood just beyond the gas chamber and could not understand the meaning of the incongruous celebration. The beastly commandant, who was accustomed to humiliated, broken Jews, could not countenance this spectacle of Jewish pride and flew into a rage. Bursting into the chamber he grabbed the first boy and demanded to know the reason for the dance. Calmly the boy replied, “We are celebrating our imminent departure from a world ruled by beasts such as you.”

The commandant decided to put an immediate end to the festivities with a cruel announcement. “You think you will escape your torturous existence in the peaceful gas chamber, but I will grant you a truly painful departure. I will spare you today, but tomorrow I will torture every bone in your bodies; I will slice your flesh till you expire.”

The commandant ordered the boys released from the gas chambers and housed in a barrack overnight. Despite their fate the boys celebrated Simchat Torah all night with joyous song and dance. They sanctified God’s name by dedicating their last night to expressing gratitude for the privilege of their Jewishness and for the precious gift of the Torah.

Later that night the boys were miraculously selected for transport to another camp by a high ranking Nazi official who was not aware of their “crimes.” This selection saved their lives and Auschwitz survivors testified that the entire group survived the Holocaust.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

⇒ Although the Holocaust was a time of unprecedented darkness, a time (as will be discussed in the class on the theology of the Holocaust) of Divine concealment, this did not prevent the occasional
sparks of light. Almost all those who survived the Holocaust see their survival as nothing less than miraculous.

This miracle has posed a certain difficulty for survivors, who ask over and again, why me? For us, however, the presence of miracles, of tiny beacons of light in the midst of bleak darkness, is a symbol of hope, a sign of the fact that the Divine concealment was not, and cannot be, absolute. The survival of the Jewish people, in spite of their terrible loss, was guaranteed.

SECTION III. RIGHTEOUS GENTILES

Over 20,000 people have been awarded the title of Righteous Gentile, including men and women from all European countries, as well as people from other countries who acted to save Jews in Europe during the Holocaust. There were many instances of individuals or entire towns who risked their lives to save Jews. More than eighty righteous diplomats from twenty-four countries were responsible for rescuing over 150,000 people during the Nazi era. These diplomats mostly defied the orders of their governments to issue visas to every country in the free world. Among these diplomats were Raoul Wallenberg of Sweden, Sugihara of Japan, Hiram Bingham of the US, and Aristides Sousa Mendes of Portugal. Mr. Mendes worked in Bordeaux and lost his job and property after issuing 30,000 visas in June 1940, including 10,000 to Jews. Mendes’ son said: “My father did what he did because, as he said, ‘I’d rather be with God against man, than with man against God.’”


Between May 15 and July 9, 1944 more than half a million Jews were deported from Hungary. By July, along with Germany’s declining military situation, the Hungarian leader, Miklos Horthy finally decided to stand up to the Nazis and insist that the deportations halt. By then, the Hungarian provinces had been cleared. Almost 440,000 Jews were gone. But most of Budapest’s 230,000 Jews were still in the capital. Working with a staff of over 300 people, largely volunteers, Wallenberg developed relief projects, but threw most of his efforts into plans to bring Jews under Swedish protection. Soon after arriving in Budapest in July 1944, he rented a building, applied Swedish extraterritorial status to it, and used it as a safe haven for several hundred Jewish religious leaders. He also persuaded the Swedish government to allow the issuance of special protective passports to Hungarian Jews. With time, he brought several additional buildings under Swedish extraterritoriality and expanded the passport scheme. By these means, Wallenberg ultimately saved at least 20,000 Jews.

For three precarious months after Horthy terminated the deportations, conditions for the Budapest Jews, though bad, remained survivable. Then, in mid-October, with the Russians only one hundred miles east of the capital Horthy moved for an armistice with the Allies. Reacting swiftly, the Nazis forced him to resign as head of state by threatening to kill his son. They then installed a puppet regime under Ferenc Szalasi and the fascist Arrow Cross party …

The Szalasi period put Raoul Wallenberg to his severest tests. The day after the Arrow Cross came to power, his mostly Jewish relief staff completely disappeared. The next day, he located them, one by one, and moved them to safer locations. At about the same time, the Szalasi regime declared all the protective passports void. Wallenberg managed to get that ruling retracted. Once, an armed patrol entered an area of Swedish protected houses and began to seize Jews. Wallenberg appeared and shouted, “This is Swedish territory … if you want to take them, you will have to shoot me first.” The Jews were released. Again, when he learned that eleven people with Swedish passports had been put on a train for Austria, Wallenberg pursued it by automobile, caught it at the last stop before the border,
and took the eleven off. At the time of the ghastly marches to Austria, he carried food and other supplies to the victims. And he succeeded, by various pretexts, in removing hundreds of Jews from the columns and returning them to protected houses in Budapest.

2. [www.raoulwallenberg.net](http://www.raoulwallenberg.net) – Raoul Wallenberg (continued).

During the second week of January 1945, Raoul Wallenberg learned that Eichmann was about to set in motion a total massacre of the Jews living in Budapest’s larger ghetto. The only person who could prevent it was General August Schmidhuber, commander of the German troops in Hungary.

Wallenberg’s ally Szalay was sent to find Schmidhuber and hand over a note which declared that Raoul Wallenberg would make sure that the general would be held personally responsible for the massacre and that he would be hanged as a war criminal after the war. The massacre was cancelled at the last minute as a result of Raoul Wallenberg’s intervention.

Two days later, the Russians arrived and found 97,000 Jews alive in the two Budapest ghettos. This brought to 120,000 the total number of Jews who had survived the Nazi efforts to exterminate them in Hungary.

According to Per Anger, Wallenberg’s friend and colleague, Wallenberg must be given credit for having saved about 100,000 Jews.

3. Ibid. – Chiune Sugihara, Consul General of Japan.

In March of the year 1939, the Consul General of Japan, Chiune Sugihara, was sent to open a consular service in Kaunas, the temporary capital of Lithuania – a strategic point between the Soviet Union and Germany. After Hitler invaded Poland on the 1st of September of 1939, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany … Ironically, the Soviets would allow the Polish Jews to emigrate from Lithuania through the Soviet Union … but only if they managed to obtain some special documents.

In this terrible context, the Japanese Consul Sugihara became the key figure in a desperate plan for survival. On July of the year 1940, the Soviet authorities ordered all foreign embassies to abandon Kaunas. Most of them obeyed immediately. Sugihara managed to extend his stay for another three weeks. With the exception of the Dutch Honorary Consul, Jan Zwartendijk, Chiune Sugihara was the only foreign consul that remained in the capital of Lithuania. A lot of work was awaiting him.

Some Polish refugees came up with a plan, possibly their last chance towards freedom. They discovered that two Dutch colonies in the Caribbean, the islands of Curacao and the Dutch Guyana (Surinam), didn’t demand strict visas to enter the country. Furthermore, the Dutch Consul informed them that he had been granted an authorization to seal their passports with entrance permits.

However, to reach these islands, refugees had to go across the Soviet Union; their consul agreed to let them pass under one condition: apart from the Dutch entrance permit, they had to get a transit visa from the Japanese consulate, for they had to cross over the Japanese empire in order to reach the islands …

Sugihara had requested three times authorization to issue visas, but every time he was denied by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He had been educated under the traditional strict Japanese discipline. He had to choose between obedience and conscience, knowing that if he defied the orders given to him by his superiors he could be discharged and dishonored and probably could never again work for his government. He ultimately obeyed his conscience, risking his wife’s and children’s future
as well as his own. He decided he would sign the visas without Tokyo’s permission.

During twenty nine days, from the 31st of July to the 28th of August of 1940, Sugihara spent endless hours writing out and signing visas by hand – more than 300 visas a day, an amount that normally meant a whole month of work for the whole consulate. People waited for their transit permits standing in line, day and night. Hundreds of applicants became thousands. Sugihara worked around the clock; he knew that in no time he would be forced to shut down the consulate and abandon Lithuania.

He continued to issue visas till the last minute, just before the train left to take him from Kovno to Berlin, on the 1st of September 1940. When the train left the station, he gave his official seal to a refugee, who could continue the rescue mission.

Once they received their visas, refugees didn’t take long to leave for Moscow by train and from there to Vladivostok in the Trans-Siberian railroad. From there, most of them went on to Kobe, Japan, a city where they were allowed to remain for several months. After that they were sent to Shangai, China.

Thousands of Polish Jews with visas issued by Sugihara survived under the protection of the Japanese government in Shangai. During the following months about six thousand refugees fled to Japan, China and other countries.


One of the most remarkable cases of Gentile resistance to the Holocaust was the King of Denmark. When the Germans went into Denmark, the first thing they did was require all the Jews to wear a yellow badge. In protest, the Danish king put on a yellow badge. All the Danes followed suit and put on yellow badges. When it became known that the Germans were going to send the Jews to the camps, the Danish underground, at great risk to themselves, mobilized anything that could float. In sailboats, fishing boats, whatever they could find, they evacuated almost all of their Jews into Sweden. Of the approximately 7,400 Jews in Denmark, only 180 were caught by the Nazis. They were put into one of the “best” concentration camps, Theresienstadt. For the rest of the war, the Danish King wrote to the Germans every single week, asking how each and every one of his Jews were, and what their condition was. At the end of the war, 100 of them had made it through.

There were many cases of individuals, families and communities who hid Jews from the Nazis during the years of the Holocaust. Whereas many of the Nazis came from educated backgrounds, the majority of these righteous gentiles were simple people with little or no academic education.

5. Ibid. – Communities who hid Jews.

Thimory, a French village of 350 inhabitants near Orleans, offered a shield of protection for a 20-year-old Auschwitz survivor identified only as Moschkovitch, and his family. They lived openly in the village, using their own name. He recalled: “All the people of Thimory knew that we were Jews, from the mayor and the school teacher to the last farmer, and including the sister of the priest … We were never denounced although there were many people there, not to say a majority, who thought well of Petain and his Vichy government.”

Nicole David was a hidden child with a Catholic family in Belgium when she was six years old. In 1942, her father arranged for her to hide with him in Besine, a Belgian village of 150 residents. “The village was hiding at least 30 Jews,” she wrote later. “Eudor Clobert, the mayor, and the priest, whose name I can’t remember, and Maurice Pochet, who kept the village shop, saved many lives, providing Jews with false papers, food and communications. The whole village was very good.”
The citizens of Secchiano, a close-knit village in central Italy, banded together to shelter Wolf and Esther Fullenbaum and their four-year-old daughter, Carlotta. Their presence was common knowledge and even a source of pride among the 600 villagers. Housed on the second floor of a schoolhouse, the refugee family received food and supplies from storekeepers and neighbors. Even though the village priest was arrested for hiding other refugees, not one citizen ever betrayed the Fullenbaums, who remained in Secchiano for more than a year and survived the war.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

〜 Over 20,000 people have been awarded the title of Righteous Gentile, including men and women from all European countries, as well as people from other countries who acted to save Jews in Europe during the Holocaust.

〜 There were many instances of individuals or entire towns who risked their lives to save Jews.

〜 More than eighty righteous diplomats from twenty-four countries were responsible for rescuing over 150,000 people during the Nazi era. These diplomats mostly defied the orders of their governments to issue visas to every country in the free world. Among these diplomats were Raoul Wallenberg of Sweden, Sugihara of Japan, Hiram Bingham of the US, and Aristides Sousa Mendes of Portugal.
CLASS SUMMARY:

DID JEWS REALLY GO TO THEIR DEATH “LIKE LAMBS TO THE SLAUGHTER”?

We cannot possibly imagine the horrors of the Holocaust. To claim that the Jews could have resisted the Nazi killing machine is to deny the magnitude of the Nazi crimes. Jews resisted however they could, physically and spiritually. But resistance, during those years, was about survival.

HOW DID JEWS RESIST THE NAZIS?

There is much emphasis placed on the Jews’ physical resistance to the Nazi animals. Indeed, the fact that any such resistance was attempted is indicative of bravery and valor. Yet there is another type of resistance, the resistance of the spirit. Throughout the years of the Holocaust, countless Jews “lived” and died with an unconquerable spirit, and the knowledge that one day the Jewish people would be redeemed. Facing bitter, cruel opposition and overwhelming obstacles, the Jewish victims of persecution succeeded in retaining their human dignity, clinging to their religion and its directives, and even rebuilding after their lives had been shattered.

WHAT SIGNS OF DIVINE INTERVENTION AND ASSISTANCE WERE PRESENT DURING THE HOLOCAUST?

It is said that anyone who survived the horrors of the Holocaust did so in a miraculous fashion. Indeed, the probability of any Jew surviving the vast, powerful Nazi killing machine was probably nil. There are numerous stories of individual personal miracles that occurred during the Holocaust, saving a person or group of people from certain death. These are clear signs that God was still with the Jewish people even during those dark days.

WHAT WAS THE MEANING OF HEROISM DURING THE HOLOCAUST?

There were certainly heroes who engaged in physical resistance and rebellions against the Nazis. But there are also many other unsung heroes of the Holocaust, people who retained their humanity, their dignity, and their religious devotion in the midst of a world gone mad. The concept of heroism thus has many dimensions in light of the awful events of the Holocaust.

HOW DID RIGHTEOUS GENTILES RISK THEIR LIVES TO SAVE JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST?

Over 20,000 people have been awarded the title of Righteous Gentile, including men and women from all European countries, as well as people from other countries who acted to save Jews in Europe during the Holocaust. There were many instances of individuals or entire towns who risked their lives to save Jews. More than eighty righteous diplomats from twenty-four countries were responsible for rescuing over 150,000 people during the Nazi era.