

Musings From My Hermitage by Larry F. Ginsberg



Days of Contemplation

The High Holy Days at present are days of contemplation, days when we must determine what we must do to make our world a better and more humane place, and days when we must seek forgiveness from G-d and those we may have offended in the past year.

The following article by Lev Poplov brings us back to a time when the very future of the existence of Judaism was on the line, the Holocaust. It was a time when Jews in Nazi captivity had to determine how to remember the High Holy Days and render them meaningful in the light of their desperation. Do they Fast! Can they assemble and pray! Their very survival was at stake. Lev Poplov, through interviews with survivors, depicts the angst and terror that Jews had to live through just to survive another day.

The Holocaust unofficially began with Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass) in November 1938 and ended with the liberation of the concentration camps in the spring of 1945. Despite the grave dangers involved, many Jews tried to keep their traditions and practices alive in the ghettos and concentration camps.

The following accounts tell of three ways that Jews marked the High Holy Days during these dark times.

In the following passage, from Elie Wiesel's "Night," the Jews of Auschwitz debated whether or not to fast on Yom Kippur in 1944. It was truly a debate waged in hell. They were, after all, starving, each of them near death. What is most striking about the passage is the faith it communicates: starving men debate as if their life depended on the outcome. In reality, of course, each man's decision was exactly that, a matter of life or death.

"Among the prisoners was a teenager just three days shy of his 16th birthday. He would later write of that debate: The Day of Atonement. Should we fast? The question was hotly debated... In this place, we were always fasting. It was Yom Kippur year-round. But there were those who said we should fast, precisely because it was dangerous to do so. We needed to show God that even here, locked in hell, we were capable of singing his praises."

Wiesel writes that he did not fast that Yom Kippur. In part, he did not because his father, knowing that his son needed every morsel of food he could get, forbade him from doing so. But he also did not fast for another reason: It was a protest against God's silence. It was not an act of denial, but an act of faith.

Many Holocaust memoirs and the testimony of eyewitnesses record how Jews living under Nazi rule took extraordinary risks to mark Yom Kippur in some way. Yaffa Eliach's book "Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust" recounts the horrors endured by a Hungarian Jewish slave-labor battalion in 1944.

The prisoners were routinely beaten, starved and used as human mine detectors. On Erev Yom Kippur, they were warned that anyone who fasted "will be executed by a firing squad."

On Yom Kippur, it rained heavily and the area was covered in deep mud. When the Germans distributed their meager food rations, the Jewish prisoners pretended to consume them but instead "spilled the coffee into the running muddy gullies and tucked the stale bread into their soaked jackets." Those who had memorized portions of the Yom Kippur prayer service recited them by heart until finally, as night fell, their work ended and they prepared to break the fast.

They were then confronted by the German commander, who told them he was aware that they had fasted, and instead of simply executing them, they would have to climb a nearby mountain and slide down it on their stomachs. "Tired, soaked, starved and emaciated," the Jews did as they were told, 10 times "climbing and sliding from an unknown Polish mountain which on that soggy Yom Kippur night became a symbol of Jewish courage and human dignity."

Eventually the Germans tired of this sport and the defiant Jewish prisoners were permitted to break their fast and live – at least for another day.

Chassia Gering-Goldberg, in "The Book of Telz," relates that the Telz Ghetto in Lithuania, was in the worst part of the city. The men had already been deported, and the people who remained, mostly women, lived in cowsheds and stables. When Rosh Hashanah arrived, the women gathered in the old synagogue for the holiday service. There were hardly any prayer books, nor was there anyone to serve as rabbi or cantor.

Suddenly a sweet voice was heard: "Bless the Lord who is blessed," and the congregation responded, "Blessed be the Lord who is blessed forever and ever." In front of the Holy Ark stood a young girl who prayed by heart, like a real cantor. The girl also pretended to blow the shofar. She put her hands to her mouth and blew through her fists to make the sounds of the ram's horn.

The girl was Tova Golda Amalan. In the past, she had helped a widower with his shopping and prepared his meals on Shabbat and festival eves. Tova refused to take any money from the man, but he wanted to give her something for all of her work. The old man was a cantor and she asked him to teach her the prayers for festivals. Now, in these hours of grief and fear, she used her sweet voice to sing the beautiful songs to comfort the women in the ghetto.

On Dec. 24 and 25, 1941, the Nazis murdered the Telz women, including Tova Amalan. Only 64 women survived.

Perhaps the most amazing thing these accounts illustrate is how in the depths of their despair, many of our people saw the High Holy Days as a way to keep hope alive. This is a lesson we can all draw strength from.

May we all have a *shanah tovah*.