
THE HOLOCAUST AND JEWISH FAITH II

❧ FAITH AMIDST THE UNFATHOMABLE ❧

In the first Morasha shiur, we discussed basic questions of faith in God, Torah sources about national devastation, Jewish explanations for such suffering, and how the Holocaust was a preparation for a burgeoning of Jewish life. This second shiur looks at the Jews who were caught in the horrors of the Holocaust and demonstrated an astounding faith in God and Judaism. We will see how their faith was manifested by practicing chesed and performing mitzvot, and those who died as martyrs, *al Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying God's name.

Here we will address the following questions:

- ❧ How did those who lived during the Holocaust manifest their faith?
- ❧ What does it mean to die *al Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying God's name?
- ❧ Can the six million be considered martyrs?

CLASS OUTLINE:

- Section I: The Valiant Performance of Chesed and Mitzvot during the Holocaust
- Section II: Martyrdom - The *Kiddush Hashem* of Holocaust Victims
- Section III: Meaningful Though Ungraspable

SECTION I: THE VALIANT PERFORMANCE OF CHESED AND MITZVOT DURING THE HOLOCAUST

As we think about the Holocaust, we must try to see beyond the view that the Jews were just passive victims of the events. For many, the Holocaust gave an impetus for reaching great spiritual heights. Despite the hardship, cruelty and inhumanity, Jewish spirits would not be broken. Just the opposite – the steadfast belief in God and dedication to Judaism propelled countless Jews to adhere to the valiant practice of *chesed* (kindness) and *mitzvah* observance.

Writer Sara Yoheved Rigler describes her first shocking conversation with her future mentor, Rebbetzin Chaya Sara Kramer, when Rigler was a mere beginner on her road to becoming an observant Jew.

1. **Sara Yoheved Rigler, *Holy Woman*, pp. 19-20. – A new perspective, our situation is judged by the opportunities for growth that it brings.**

She asked me about my background. I told her about the ashram. Then I asked her about her experiences during the Holocaust, a subject with which I have always been obsessed. She described how, on the first night in Auschwitz, a long-term inmate had pointed to the smoke issuing from the chimney of the crematoria and told her, “That’s your parents.”

Nevertheless, she asserted, “Auschwitz was not a bad place.”

What? I must have misunderstood. I asked her to repeat her statement.

“Auschwitz was not a bad place,” she repeated clearly. “There was a group of religious girls there. We stuck together. And all the *mitzvot* [commandments] that we could keep, we did keep. For example, one girl kept track of the days, so we always knew when it was Shabbat, and whenever possible, we avoided doing any forbidden work. We recited *berachot* (blessings) over our food, meager as it was. And every morning, when the guards weren’t looking, we *davened Shacharit* (prayed the morning service).”

The holy woman fixed me with her pale blue eyes. “A bad place is a place where Jews can observe the *mitzvot*, but don’t do them. For you, the ashram was a bad place.”

She had just turned my whole reality upside down. A bad place had nothing to do with bad things happening *to* you. No matter that the Nazis had murdered her whole family. No matter that Dr. Mengele had used her for his nefarious experiments. All that really matters is what issues *from* you.

In this perspective God’s activity in the Holocaust was what it always is. He was providing a new context for the Jewish people to achieve greatness. (This approach does not contradict the previous ones. In fact many sources we cited in the first shiur understood the Holocaust as preparation for the future precisely because it caused so many spiritual merits, most prominently the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hashem* [sanctifying God’s name].)

2. **Ibid., p. 53 – the Power to Choose Good**

Even though Chaya Sara did not have the power to save her loved ones, by keeping up her religious practices to the extent possible, she exercised the only power she believed any human possessed: the power to do good. In this sense, incredibly, she considered Auschwitz no worse than any other scene in the theater of this world. The choice is always between good and evil.

The same essential point is made by others in a more philosophic language.

3. **Neusner, Faith Renewed, article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “The Holocaust In The Context Of Judaism,” p. 47 – Never a victim.**

But there was a further Jewish response to suffering, different in kind from those we have considered. It was best expressed by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who discerned two different stances through which evil could be experienced, one passive, the other active. Man suffers: he is an object to whom things happen. But he also acts: he is a subject through whom things happen. As object, he asks “Why has this happened?” As subject, he asks a different question: “What then shall I do?”...The first, in which man-as-object seeks to understand what is happening to him, has its place in Jewish thought... But the second, in which man-as-subject seeks to discern how to act, is characteristic of what Soloveitchik sees as the primary mode of Jewish consciousness – *halakhah* or Jewish law. The halakhic personality refuses to be transformed by tragedy from subject to object...

In this context the most striking literature to have emerged from the Holocaust is not the theological but halakhic: the considered rulings of Jewish law given by rabbis in the ghettos and concentration camps in response to never-before-imagined questions. May a father purchase his son’s escape from the ovens, knowing that the quotas will be met and another child will die in his place?...

One particular example is worthy of attention. On 29 October 1941, 30,000 Jews assembled in the Kovno ghetto to face selection for death. One of those present, Reb Elya, posed a question to a rabbi among the crowd, Rabbi Ephraim Oshry. What is the correct form of blessing to be said on going to one’s death for the sanctification of God...In the presence of the Gestapo, two Jews, disciple and teacher were able to stand discussing the Talmud, concerned that the moment of death be dedicated to Heaven by the precise word of blessing...By insisting on making a blessing over a death that seemed to defy all meaning, Reb Elya was making an ultimate affirmation. There is no point at which evil can turn man from subject to object, no situation which cannot be the occasion of a religious act.

Where every external force demanded that they give up their identity as Jews and people, they refused to surrender.

4. **Guterman, *Narrow Bridge*, quoted by Esther Farbstein, *Hidden In Thunder*, p. 424 – Spiritual Resistance**

In the Gross-Rosen labor camp, prisoners held services daily. “By so doing, the Orthodox prisoners outwitted the Nazi system by remaining human and preserving their own identity and will.”

Another example – from an entire book on the topic – about what concerned some Jews where others would have only been concerned with physical survival.

5. ***Responsa from the Holocaust*, Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, Targum Press, 1983, p. 49 – Reciting 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 reciting Shema, and ended very late at night. I was asked how the laborers should fulfill the mitzvah of reciting the morning Shema. During work itself, it was impossible for them to concentrate and recite the entire Shema properly, since the Germans constantly approached them with work orders and commands, compelling the Jewish laborers to interrupt their reciting of the Shema. They could only recite it in fragments. Nor could they wait to recite the Shema during the lunch break since the break came after midday, when the time for Shema was long over.

6. **Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder*, Vol. II, Mosad Harav Kook Publishers, pp. 428-429 – Sacrifice for the mitzvah of *tefillin* (phylacteries).**

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.

7. **Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder*, quoting Gradowski, “*Leil Shabbat Kodesh*,” pp. 423-424 – *Daily minyanim (prayer quorums) begin and then grow in Auschwitz*.**

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.

9. **Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, *Small Miracles of the Holocaust*, Lyons Press, March 2008, pp. 179-181 (also related by Rabbi Meisels, a survivor who witnessed this event in person, author of *Mekadshei Hashem*) – Saved by the dance.**

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.

Some experienced their deepest sense of being alive when they exercised their ability to choose in the harshest of circumstances.

10. **Neusner, Faith Renewed, article by Berkovits “Authenticity of Being,” p. 121 – Truly alive in Hell.**

One of the survivors of the Lodz ghetto recalls the past in these words: “The truth is that I am ashamed of myself. How I have fallen from *igra rama*, from the lofty heights of those days to the life of comforts and smallness of today. Woe is me! How far I am today even from the mere perception of the sublime of that time...What are our concepts of the ghetto today? *Gehinnom*, hell, graveyard! Dark and black abyss! Yet for us, for our group the ghetto was the furnace in which our unlimited commitment (*mesirut nefesh*) was purified and where one reached a purity of attachment to the Divine than which nothing higher is conceivable.”

Another survivor, explaining how the Torah teachings of his father and other pious Jews helped him cope with continually mounting suffering in the ghetto, summed up his memories by observing: “Perhaps now some will believe me when I say in full truth and seriousness that to this day I have not tasted life as I did in those days of trouble.”

For generations Jews have sung that the Torah is their life. In the Holocaust, some lived these words to an unparalleled degree.

11. **Maza, With Fury Poured Out, pp. 133-4 – Sustained by Torah.**

The following account published in the *Jewish Morning Journal* of September 24, 1945, was taken from the memoirs of Dr. Leo Baeck.

“It took place in the concentration camp of Tresenstadt. Every day, every hour, each one of us was prepared to take his last walk. None of us knew when the murderers would decide to kill us. What did the Jews do? Did they sit and cry? No! They displayed superhuman, supernatural powers. They gathered in the dark of night to study the Torah, to discuss Judaism and to listen to lectures on matters of eternity.

“These gatherings in the attic in the night were dangerous not only because of the possibility of discovery by the Nazis. But there was also an added peril. The men worked in the daytime doing back-breaking work. After their work they needed rest. And here, instead of resting they gathered for the nightly study sessions. It would seem that this would have weakened them more. However, strange as it may seem, the truth was that these ‘spiritual injections,’ these lectures, in the attic did not weaken them. On the contrary, they were strengthened; they gained new power to withstand their sufferings.

“I will never forget these gatherings. We used to gather in the darkness because lighting a candle, even a match was fraught with danger. But in the midst of the darkness I felt a light. A kind of Divine light shone from the faces of the Jews who gathered in the attic of Treisenstadt as we spoke about God, about the Jews and the world, about the eternity of Israel.

“And if on the next day I would ask one of them if they felt weakened by the late hours of the night before, they would answer me, ‘You are mistaken if you think that these lectures weaken us. They give us strength not only spiritually but even physically. They help us overcome our weakness.’”

It is interesting to note that the Holocaust was the context in which some first began to do mitzvot.

12. **Tabaksblat, Avodim Hoyinu, quoted in Michman, In Faithfulness, 294. (Cited by Farbstein, p. 523.) – Returning to Torah in the camps.**

[The Hungarian Jews turned] our block into a Galician-Hungarian *kloyz*..where Jews prayed overtly, studied, sang, and danced. This outpouring of prayer, song, and recitation of Psalms had a good influence on me. Although I had spent many years in a different spiritual environment, far from religiosity, now – of all times – I derived contentment from Judaism, where here, in the slave-labor camp, revived scenes from a traditional Judaism of yore for me. I felt like one of them...I hardly noticed how I was drawn slowly to their passionate Hasidic melodies and dances. I penetrated their world so fully that no one would have recognized me as the former heretic.

Jewish spiritual greatness was the focus of Mr. Joseph Friedenson’s recounting of the Holocaust.

13. **Rabbi Yossi Friedman, “God Has Not Forsaken You” (aish.Com.) – God Has not forsaken you**

Mr. Joseph Friedenson passed away on the Shabbat right before Purim, known as *Shabbat Zachor*, the Sabbath of Remembrance when we remember what the Amalekites did to the Jewish People. How fitting, for my Zeidy, who endured many years of suffering at the hands of the Nazis, dedicated his life to sharing his memories of those times. But these were never bitter memories...

Zeidy never spoke about the soldiers who beat him. He never spoke about the daily shootings which took place around him. He never spoke about his entire family and townspeople who were led to the gas chambers. Zeidy spoke about the never-ending faith and spiritual strength that were displayed by Jews during the horrors of the Holocaust. He spoke about the Jews who would share their last crumbs of bread with starving children and families, not knowing if and when their own stockpile would be replenished. He spoke about the unwavering faith of even the most “simple Jew” in

the death camps or what he called “the universities of Nazi atrocities.” Zeidy “graduated” from seven universities of Nazi atrocities with his rock solid faith in God intact. He regaled us about the Jewish nation and how we are eternal and unique, always using the term “indestructible.”

...He had the unique talent of speaking German and Polish, extremely unique for a Chassidic Jew from Lodz. It was a very useful tool for his survival in the camps as it gave him a use to the Nazis. He told us how before one Passover in Starchowitz, a slave labor camp, he was able to negotiate some extra flour from the kitchen and they were able to bake matzah. When the camp commandant walked in and saw them eating the matzah, he yelled at him, “Friedenson, *fres broidt* - eat bread! Don't eat these crackers - they won't give you any nourishment at all. What are these crackers?”

After explaining to him that it was Passover and Jews are forbidden to eat bread, the Commandant became furious. “Your God has forsaken you and you still believe in Him?! You still eat these crackers just because He told you? Your God has completely abandoned you, don't you see that?”

The Commandant seemed to have stumped the entire group; they recognized the dire situation that they were in. While Zeidy was struggling to find an answer, a Jew named Akiva Goldshtof piped up. “No,” he said. “God has not totally forsaken us. It is true that God has temporarily put us in this situation, but not totally and not forever.” Zeidy said that those words resonated with the camp inmates until they were transferred to Auschwitz in 1944.

Before leaving Starchowitz, while the group was passing through the doors on their way to Auschwitz, a German soldier named Bruno Papa turned to my Zeidy and said, “Friedenson, don't you remember what Goldshtof said: ‘Not totally and not forever’? You guys will be fine. Your God will take care of you.” Zeidy would point out that it was apparent even to the German guard during those times of horror and hopelessness that the Jewish people are indestructible...

...Instead of focusing on the unimaginable hell and suffering of the Holocaust, Zeidy made the point of telling young generations other facets that were all too often left undiscussed: Divine Providence and the promise of Jewish eternity, their relatives' heroic dedication to perform mitzvot despite risking their lives, their grandparents' indestructible faith and courage.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I

∞ **Reading the stories of what many Jews did to fulfill mitzvot in the Holocaust changes one's perspective. One begins to realize that the Holocaust is not merely as the world views it – the story of what the Gentiles did to the Jews. Nor is it just the story of what God did to the Jews. It is also – and perhaps primarily – the story of what the Jews did and achieved; the story, as Rabbi Bernard Maza subtitles his book, of “the Power of the Powerless during the Holocaust.”**

SECTION II. MARTYRDOM – THE KIDDUSH HASHEM OF HOLOCAUST VICTIMS

To really grasp how the Torah views the Holocaust one needs to understand something about the greatest mitzvah of all – the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem.

1. **Kiddush Hashem (according to Ner Le’Elef) – Definition of Kiddush Hashem.**

Kiddush Hashem is defined as the promotion of God in the world, demonstrating His omnipresence, His omniscience, His almighty power, and His sovereignty over humanity. As the verse declares, the Nation of Israel was created for this very purpose: “This nation I have created for Myself, [in order that] they should tell of My glory” (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 43:21). “Telling God’s glory” is the essential definition of Kiddush Hashem. Ultimately, the goal of a Kiddush Hashem is to bring about the positive awareness of the Presence of God in the world. As the Rambam writes in the Sefer HaMitzvot (Positive Mitzvah #9), “It is appropriate to publicize the Presence of God so that He will be known in the world.”

We have seen that many Jews retained spiritual values amid the horrors of the Holocaust. While struggling to survive they still sought to fulfill mitzvot. It is important to note that there is actually a mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem, under certain specific circumstances, to choose to give up one’s very life for the sake of God. One who has done so has shown that nothing in his own life is as important as God. He has transcended all narrow self-interest.

2. **Kiddush Hashem (according to Ner Le’Elef) – Dying for the Torah – al Kiddush Hashem.**

At certain periods in Jewish history, Jews have been forced to accept other religions or commit one of the three cardinal transgressions (idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder) under the threat of death. In such times a Jew is called upon to give up his life for his faith – a sacrifice that demonstrates in a powerful way that God’s Will, as guided by the Torah, is the ultimate reason for life...Throughout the millennia, individuals and even entire Jewish communities chose to give up their lives rather than accept other religions.

Though very few in our times ever actually fulfill the mitzvah of dying al Kiddush Hashem, it is always supposed to play a role in our consciousness. The Mishna Berurah (61:3) suggests that when we say the *Shema* twice a day, we should picture ourselves choosing death over the renunciation of our religion. Twice a day we should try to grasp that there is something more important than our small selves.

Giving up our lives for the Torah is considered the greatest mitzvah of all. No less than the Rambam (Maimonides) rules that one who has done this has reached the highest possible level.

3. **Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 5:4 – Someone who chooses martyrdom rather than transgressing sanctifies the Name of God and joins an elite group of those who have sanctified God’s Name.**

Anyone who is told that he must give up his life rather than transgress, and he did not transgress [but chose to give up his life] – he has sanctified the Name. And if it was done in front of ten Jews, he has sanctified the Name in public like...Rabbi Akiva and others. These people are martyrs, whose stature is unmatched by any other.

וכל מי שנאמר בו יהרג ואל יעבור ונהרג ולא עבר הרי זה קידש את השם ואם היה בעשרה מישראל הרי זה קידש את השם ברבים כ...רבי עקיבא וחביריו ואלו הן הרוגי מלכות שאין מעלה על מעלתן.

The concept of Kiddush Hashem is crucial for understanding how the observant community grapples with the Holocaust. Already during the Holocaust, it became customary to regard the victims of the Holocaust as martyrs, dying for the sake of Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of the Holy Name of God. If so, the deaths of the six million were the very opposite of meaningless; these victims were fulfilling the greatest mitzvah of all and achieving the highest possible level.

This idea is not without its problems. The classical case of Kiddush Hashem involves the conscious decision to give up one’s very life for the sake of God under circumstances such as forced conversion that obligate such an action. In medieval times, for instance, Jews were given a choice between death and converting to Christianity. In the case of the Holocaust, most victims were given no choice in the matter. The Nazis wanted to kill every Jew. How can the deaths in the Holocaust be considered as Kiddush Hashem?

Rabbi E. E. Dessler was bothered by the question. His response was to propose a new idea of Kiddush Hashem.

4. **Rabbi E. E. Dessler, Michtav me-Eliyahu, Vol. V, p. 348 – Inner Kiddush Hashem.**

Deep are the ways of Truth, exceedingly deep; who can find them? And therefore they are not known to many, only to select individuals, people of Truth.

Many have asked and wondered – what profit was there in the death of these? Had they died as a result of a decree of forced conversion, and given up their lives for the sanctification of God’s Name, then we would not question it. But these murderers did not demand [that these Jews adopt a different] faith; rather, they wanted to annihilate, kill and destroy – believers and heretics alike – and to put them all to death for having been born Jewish. What is the point of this? Even the opportunity of sanctifying God’s Name was denied to the victims! And this being so, what was it all for? A great question...

But the people of Truth knew what it meant. This was not intended as a test of forced conversion, nor of sanctifying God’s Name in the eyes of the nations. Rather...it was something more difficult; the most difficult thing of all...an incomparably enormous

service... The test was to see who was true in his heart; who would sanctify God within his own heart, and turn his whole heart towards the blessed God, bar nothing, and truly rejoice in the terrible suffering of death...and experience complete joy at the contentment of cleaving to God. This is the most supreme purpose; this is...the service of the “birth pangs of the Messiah.” Even the supremely holy Tannaim and Amoraim were fearful that perhaps they would not properly fulfill their obligation in the service of the “birth pangs of the Messiah.” Concerning this they prayed, “Let him – the Messiah – come, but let me not [live to] see him.”

The idea of inner Kiddush Hashem is not easy. Outwardly, the death appears meaningless; what meaning can there be to an act that does not proceed from will or choice? The meaning, according to Rabbi Dessler, is inner: What a victim was thinking while taking his final steps towards the gas chambers or the pits. Did he accept God’s judgment? The deaths lacked the heroics of an outward display of Kiddush Hashem; in a sense, they were even greater, for they did not provide the satisfaction of this ultimate victory, offering only the inner truth in one’s heart.

We see that there were many who fulfilled this test.

5. **Adler, Be-Gei Tsalmavet, pp. 27-29 (Quoted in Farbstein, p. 523) – Joy in the greatest mitzvah.**

During that time, hundreds of young men from Hungary were also brought to the camp. Virtually all of them trembled at the word of God and were infused with willingness to actually give their lives for Kiddush Hashem. I heard that when taken to the gas chambers, some of these young men spent their final moments dancing, with *Shema Yisrael* on their lips.

Jews 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, showing how they valued Him above all else.

6. **Moshe Prager, Eleh Shelo Nikne’u, Vol. I, Bnei Brak, Israel: Netzach, pp. 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.”

And this inner choice was made by some who had been very far from the Torah.

7. **Farbstein, Hidden In Thunder, pp. 461-2 from Dr. David Wdowinski, testimony, in The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, 3:1234 – Returning to his people from very far away.**

Ordinary Jews, too – and even apostates and assimilated Jews – expressed their faith in their parting words. Poignant testimony about one such person was given at the Eichmann trial: In the Budzyn camp there was a prisoner from Stettin, Germany, by the name of Bauchwitz, whose family had converted to Christianity when he was about six. He was sentenced to hang for declining to report an escaped prisoner...Then Bauchwitz mounted the gallows and asked to address a few words to the Jews in the camp: “I was born a Jew, and all that I remember of my Judaism is one prayer – in fact, only the opening words of that prayer, and they are: ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,’ and that is all I remember. But I want to and am going to die as a Jew – and I ask you Jews to say ‘kaddish’ (memorial prayer) for me.”

Where eyes of flesh would have only seen a man being murdered, the eyes of the spirit would have seen a man being lifted to the heights.

8. **Rabbi Bernard Maza, With Fury Poured Out, pp.138-9 – Calmly going to eternity.**

It happened in Treblinka. The time for extermination arrived. They were transported like cattle to the slaughter. Silently they accepted their judgment. The people going to their death did not let even a sigh escape from their lips. They did everything the evil Nazis commanded...Before they were sent into the gas ovens Rabbi Yerucham Hanushtate arose and said, “This is our final journey in life. We are being led to destruction, fathers, mothers and children together. No one will live. So, I say to you, let us ourselves say the Kaddish that in normal times our children and relatives would say for us. Let us declare our acceptance of God’s judgment and sanctify the Name of God whose deeds are righteous and holy.

The great kaddish was proclaimed. They all recited the Kaddish with holiness and purity and with the serenity of people who were privileged to sanctify the name of God in the world.

We see in story after story people able to elevate themselves above the most natural of concerns: their own lives.

9. **Ibid., p. 138 – Rejoicing in God.**

The Rabbi of Dombrow, Rabbi Chaim Yechiel Rubin, and about twenty followers were brought to the cemetery on Friday...When evening came the Rabbi said the Shabbos services with feeling. At a distance stood the murderers armed and ready for the order to kill the Jews. In the afternoon they had forced the Jews to dig their graves with their

own hands. The Jews had done so, and inside this grave they were saying the Sabbath services.

After the services the Rabbi began to sing the Sabbath songs and to teach words of Torah. In the midst of his words of Torah, he became filled with great feeling and he began to sing and dance. His spirit took hold of the Jews that were with him and they burst into song and began to dance in their grave, purifying their souls along with the Rabbi. The Nazi Commander gave the order to shoot, and in the midst of their dancing their souls departed them.

10. [Esther Farbstein, Hidden in Thunder, pp. 451-2 – Preparing for martyrdom.](#)

During the Holocaust, many people took practical steps to prepare for Kiddush Hashem: Rabbis and leaders prepared themselves and their followers by studying the issue, apparently sensing that it would be necessary. In Warsaw, Rabbi Menahem Ziemba studied the laws and came up with new thoughts on the subject. The topic occupied an important place in religious classes in some ghettos. In the Wieszuszw ghetto, classes were given by Rabbi Chaim Elazar Eibshitz: “We studied Talmud and Tosafot...but what made the strongest impression on me was studying the laws of Kiddush Hashem as presented by Maimonides.” Rabbi Carlebach of Hamburg, taken with some of his community to a camp in Riga, continued teaching Talmud and Mishnah there, and in his sermons he told people to be constantly ready to perform Kiddush Hashem. Just before the deportation from Sanniki, Rabbi Aronson delivered a sermon on the subject...

Hasidic leaders devoted a great deal of attention in their teachings to preparation for the mitzvah, so that their followers would take full advantage of the moment of the mitzvah.

“When [the (previous) Slonimer Rebbe] was martyred, it was with peace of mind. He had spent several years preparing himself and the public to fulfill the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem.”

But Rav Dessler’s concept of an inner choice for Kiddush Hashem does not apply equally to all the millions of Holocaust victims. Most went to their deaths without the presence of mind to contemplate their tragic fate and its inner meaning. Were their deaths meaningless?

The response of most Jewish thinkers seems to have been that it is simply not possible that these deaths could be meaningless. Many explained that since all were victims not of a normal war but of a war precisely against God and His people, their deaths were also cases of Kiddush Hashem.

11. **Ibid., pp. 443-5 – Killed as God’s people.**

Rabbi Aronson said that these questions troubled him incessantly on the brink of the crematoria...Various opinions on the subject were expressed in the Warsaw ghetto. Rabbi Huberland cited the definition prevalent there: “Maimonides rules that if a Jew is killed, even without any overt attempt to make him abandon the Jewish faith, but because he is a Jew, he is considered a martyr...”

It can be said that there was a religious element involved whenever someone was killed for being a Jew during the Holocaust, because the enemy had declared war on the values that the individual represented as a Jew. As Rabbi Aronson wrote: “But where the gentile has a quarrel with the word *Jew* and the very concept of Judaism is what bothers him, the Jew’s death is called Kiddush Hashem...It is therefore clear to me that the deaths of the Jews who were killed...merely for being Jewish were cases of Kiddush Hashem, because they were killed for being members of the chosen people, who have a relationship with God.”

Whether by choice or not, the Jewish victims of the Holocaust did not die like other men. They died as representatives of God Himself.

The Piaseczner Rebbe in the Warsaw ghetto and the Slonimer Rebbe of after the war (Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky) also understood that these deaths simply could not be meaningless. In different ways they each suggested that since the Jewish people is one cosmic unity, the intentions for Kiddush Hashem of some could help sanctify the deaths of their fellow Jews.

12. **Farbstein, Hidden in Thunder, pp. 473-4 – Kiddush Hashem connects the individual to the entire Jewish people.**

Both [the Piaseczner Rebbe and the Slonimer Rebbe] draw on Hasidic thought and kabbalah; both are based on love for every Jew and a perception of each individual Jew as part of a single body...According to the Piaseczner Rebbe, their deeds join together with Abraham’s intent in the Binding of Isaac [the epitome of spiritual self-sacrifice] and complement it just as it complements them, whereas according to the Slonimer Rebbe, their deeds join with the intentions of other Jews in the same generation...

Each individual’s act of Kiddush Hashem is like a branch that draws on the tree and nourishes it...

Maimonides’ statement that “this tremendous commandment of Kiddush Hashem applies to the entire house of Israel” is understood literally: The obligation is that of the nation as a whole and therefore the fulfillment of the mitzvah during the Holocaust applies to the Jewish nation as a collective.

Both views involve an organic concept of the Jewish people...In other words, every Jew who has a connection to the nation is an inseparable part of the nation, not as a result of personal choice but due to a spiritual and historical bond that exists outside space and time.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II

- ∞ **The Nazis did everything they could to reduce the Jews to below human. There were many Jews who responded by showing that what they cared about were ideals above the merely human. Furthermore, in the eyes of many great thinkers, the entire Holocaust can be defined as one vast Kiddush Hashem, a triumphant transcendence of this world by the entire House of Israel in their clinging to God.**

SECTION III. MEANINGFUL THOUGH UNGRASPABLE

When all our efforts to understand the significance of the Holocaust are done, the full meaning is still far beyond our grasp. But one thing seems clear: “More happened at Auschwitz and the other capitals of evil embodied than this world contains (Neusner, p. 9).” It is hard to contemplate these events and not sense something of the intensity of the relationship of God and His people. As Rabbi Sacks ends his article on the Holocaust, “Faced with its eclipse, the Jewish people has reaffirmed its covenant with history. The story of contemporary Jewry begins with what in retrospect is a not unremarkable fact: that the people of Israel lives and still bears witness to the living God (Neusner, p. 53).” We saw how the Piaseczner and Slonimer rebbes viewed the Jewish people during the Holocaust as a united organic entity fulfilling the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem. Reflecting on the Holocaust creates a sense of the unique and transcendent nature of the Jewish people.

1. **Neusner, Faith Renewed, article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “The Holocaust in the Context of Judaism,” pp. 44-5 – The vibrant Jewish people is the most powerful testimony that God still lives.**

The Holocaust...revealed the awesome power of faith that could not be murdered by the most systematic assault on it ever undertaken. The Jewish people is...the living witness to God's presence in history. The attempt to eliminate the people of God was an attempt to eradicate the presence of God in the human situation. The fact that after Auschwitz the Jewish people still lives and can still affirm its faith is the most powerful testimony that God still lives.

Let us end with the words of two witnesses. Each sensed the same thing – the eternity of the Jewish people. The first writer, Reuven Feldshuh, recounts what he saw in “February 1941, when he had just escaped after being seized for forced labor and found himself on Zamenhof Street in Warsaw (Farbstein, p. 414).”

2. **Reuven Feldshuh, handwritten journal, Yad Vashem Archives (Quoted in Farbstein p. 414) – A vision of the eternal people**

The *kloyz* is almost full. The cantor prays melodiously; you would never know from

him and the worshippers that the world is on the brink of an abyss. They are wearing prayer shawls and tefillin. If you closed your eyes for a moment and didn't look at these people, at their skinny faces...but just listened to the hum of their prayer, you would be sure you had fallen into a house of God in a time of quiet and tranquility... There are young people, too, among the worshippers, and not just a few. They, too, are participating in creating an atmosphere in which the physical is forgotten and the soul is dedicated to sublime, lofty service totally removed from the oppression of the body and making the suffering of the moment pale in significance...I was suddenly suffused with a warmth that I hadn't felt since before the war. Someone, something, picked me up here, carried me, and deposited me in a congregation of Jews from the Middle Ages who were fighting and dying for their religion...In the world are murder, violence, robbery, and deceit; in the street, cold; in the heart anguish and pain; but above them all there hovers a different force, supreme and eternal – the force of generations past and future.

The second testimony is from Rabbi Isaac Herzog on his impressions when he visited the Holocaust survivors in the DP camps.

3. **Sharai, Masa Hatsala, p. 44 (Quoted in Farbstein pp. 367-8) – The fire that was not extinguished.**

Here I discovered the eternal faith of the Jewish people, hidden deep inside from time immemorial – a faith that flickered and rose from the heart of each and every person in the camp, which had previously served as the center of the Nazi party in that region. I wanted to sit for hours with each and every Jew, to dress the wounds of their terribly bitter souls. I visited each organization and kibbutz, I prayed in every minyan, and during the two days of the holiday I delivered sixteen speeches. I will never forget, to my dying day, the indescribable, elevating sight of thousands of Jewish exiles, survivors from Poland, Hungary, Romania, and elsewhere, each of whom, through his own private tragedy and the look in his eye, symbolizes the loneliness and calamity of the entire nation. I will never forget how they gathered around me dancing for four straight hours, singing *Ani Ma'amin* [I believe]. I felt then as if the faith of the generations from Abraham until our times, a faith refined in the furnace of contemporary torments, was concentrated here.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III

- ☞ Even if our minds cannot fully grasp the meaning of the Holocaust, studying these events leaves a strong sense that something far outside the normal patterns of history was at work here. Though we await prophets to give us a clearer explanation, a sensitive hearts feels that the awesome events of the Holocaust can only be grasped as a huge chapter in the age-old story of God's relationship with His people.

CLASS SUMMARY:

HOW DID THOSE WHO LIVED DURING THE HOLOCAUST MANIFEST THEIR FAITH?

The story of the Holocaust is also – and perhaps primarily – the story of what the Jews did and achieved during that time. A thorough study of the Holocaust reveals countless Jews who did not despair or turn their backs on their religion. During the Holocaust, countless Jews demonstrated unswerving faith to practicing chesed and mitzvot, and others, previously distanced from Judaism, reaffirmed their commitment to Judaism.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DIE *AL KIDDUSH HASHEM*, SANCTIFYING GOD'S NAME?

The Nazis strived to eradicate the Jewish people and all that they represented. Yet, even in their deaths, the Jews responded by performing *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying God's name in this world, and maintaining their allegiance to God. In doing so, they earned eternity.

CAN THE SIX MILLION BE CONSIDERED MARTYRS?

In the eyes of many great thinkers, the entire Holocaust can be defined as one vast *Kiddush Hashem*, a triumphant transcendence of this world by the entire House of Israel in their clinging to God.

The collective sense of the Torah community has been that the death of the six million simply could not be meaningless; from the Holocaust onwards they have been labeled as "*K'doshim*" or martyrs.

How could this be, given that they had no choice in their deaths? Rav Dessler explained that many made an inner choice to accept and even rejoice in their martyrdom. The Piaseczner Rebbe and the Slonimer Rebbe said that since the Jewish people are a collective unity, the physical deaths even of those who did not so choose could be linked to the intentions of those who did, in that generation or even earlier ones back to Avraham at the Binding of Isaac. These deaths thus constitute a fulfillment of *Kiddush Hashem*. Others have asserted that since, whether they chose it or not, every Jew was killed as a representative of God's people, they died in fulfillment of *Kiddush Hashem*.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, *Ner Le'Elef Holocaust Book II: Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust, and Responses After the Holocaust*