

Jewish resilience: The fight to keep Yom Kippur during dark times

Jews imprisoned in ghettos and concentration camps still found several ways throughout that time to mark Yom Kippur.

By ILANIT CHERNICK OCTOBER 7, 2019 17:21



Religious men praying in Krakow Ghetto on Yom Kippur 1940.
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Throughout their tumultuous and difficult history, the Jewish people have always found a way to commemorate [Yom Kippur](#), even in the darkest of times.

During the Spanish Inquisition, Jews who had converted to Catholicism would secretly hold services. Although on the surface they were practicing Christians, when “The Great Day” arrived and “The Forgiveness Fast” began, they were transported back to their roots, secretly holding services in hidden synagogues and singing the words of Kol Nidre, the opening prayer.

Ashley Perry, president of Reconnectar – a project that focuses on “facilitating the reconnection of descendants of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communities with the Jewish people” – told The Jerusalem Post earlier this year that on Yom Kippur, Jewish descendants of these communities still “say a prayer before Kol Nidre for the welfare of our brethren who were imprisoned during the Inquisition, because for us, it’s not just the fact that the Inquisition has physically ended, but the effects of it are still around us.”

Fast forward some 450 years to the Holocaust, when Jews imprisoned in ghettos and concentration camps still found several ways throughout that time to mark Yom Kippur.

Yad Vashem has a treasure-trove of stories and testimonies of how Jews kept the holiest day of the year.

In the Theresienstadt Ghetto, Avraham-Adolf Hellman brought with him his shofar and prayer shawl. He was involved in community and synagogue matters before and during the war, and served as the cantor of the Sudetenkaserne Synagogue in the ghetto.

On the eve of Yom Kippur 1944, Hellman stood on the train platform waiting to be deported to Auschwitz with thousands of others.

His wife, Charlotte, recalled the chilling moments of Kol Nidre eve in a testimony to Yad Vashem.

“My husband said, ‘It’s time to pray,’” she wrote. “He placed two suitcases one on top of the other and covered them with a tallit. He stood with Levin and his son from Komotau in Bohemia, and the three put their prayer shawls over their heads and when my husband began to pray out loud, a bitter cry rose from the throats of all the men and women. One who was not there cannot even imagine it. It is necessary to understand that most of the Czech Jews were not religious... So things continued until the next day – Yom Kippur... for two days with no sleep.”

She described how people waiting on the platform “sat on their cases.”

"During Yom Kippur, whoever wanted joined the prayers," Charlotte continued. "My husband chanted the Unetaneh Tokef, and an old man, apparently a rabbi from Slovakia, removed his shoes and recited in a fearful cry 'Vidui' (confession)."

The Holocaust survivor said that the women then returned to their rooms "but we couldn't sleep. We waited for the sound of the train's departure. At 6 a.m. we heard the train's whistle."

Aryehh Zuckerman, a native German who lived in Brussels, was deported to the St.-Cyprien concentration camp in 1940 after the Germans invaded Belgium.

While he was interned, the Jewish inmates began to establish a spiritual council.

"Together with Rabbi Leo Ansbacher and other Jews in the camp, they began to work by helping the sick, organizing a center for religious life, encouraging the study of Torah and establishing a Jewish burial society," according to Yad Vashem. "While in the St.-Cyprien, Zuckerman helped compile and wrote an abridged version of the Yom Kippur prayer services – some of Judaism's most poetic and prophetic prayers – on scraps of paper to bolster the spirits of the deportees and offer them succor in the shocking circumstances in which they found themselves."

The abbreviated Yom Kippur prayer book also contains Kol Nidre and the main parts of the service.

Yad Vashem describes the pages as "tangible evidence of the efforts of camp prisoners to cling to their traditions, as a means of finding solace and spiritual fortitude in the appalling physical conditions of the French internment camps."

In October 1940, a year after the Nazis had invaded Poland, Jews in Krakow gathered for Yom Kippur services, the men donning their prayer shawls and kippot. As they prayed, the deportation of the Jews of Krakow and the surrounding towns was still taking place. By March 1941, two-thirds of Krakow's 60,000-strong Jewish population had been deported.

While it operated, Jews in the ghetto worked hard at keeping their tradition alive, especially during Passover and Yom Kippur.

Even in Auschwitz, Jews found ways to mark this auspicious day. On Yom Kippur 1944, Livia Koralek (today known as Chana Spiegel), who was a Hungarian Jew and beloved school teacher, fasted together with her friends.

“On the eve of Yom Kippur, at the request of her friends, Livia addressed a speech to the women in the camp,” according to Yad Vashem. “She spoke of their capacity to give each other love, despite the terrible conditions.”

In her speech, Spiegel prayed that “this Yom Kippur be a day of pardon, forgiveness and atonement, and may God forgive us for all our iniquities. We believe that all our families, relatives and loved ones feel as we do here in this cold, depressing and miserable camp. We promise to be righteous and good. True, this is not easy as we are all sad, hungry and cold, but here in this camp, we must try and be tolerant.

“We recite our prayers and our entreaties to God from memory, without prayer books, but our prayers burst forth from a full and breaking heart...On this holy day, we must withstand this test, we must overcome our hunger, and make do with the small ration of bread that we receive daily after a hard day’s work, and not touch anyone else’s ration.”

Afterwards, “the women did not eat the bread they received on Yom Kippur – they hid it under their pillows.”

Ruth Brand, a Holocaust survivor who was also in Auschwitz, recalled Yom Kippur 1944 in a video published by the USC Shoah Foundation. She and her cousin both fasted, and when the SS soldiers found out, they made them do push ups, run, and perform other strenuous exercise.

“It was a very, very hot day,” she said, but despite the heat and the SS forcing them to exercise, the two carried on fasting. Some of the young girls interned with them asked why they were fasting, claiming that if God wanted them to fast, “He would have given us much better conditions.”

Brand responded that “maybe He wanted to see that in spite” of the bad conditions, “we are still going to fast.”

Although they kept the soup they were given at lunch, by the time the end of the fast had come, it had already spoiled because of the heat of the day.