

WHEN
HUMANITY
FAILS toolbox

The Miracle of Chanukah

This excerpt portrays an account by Jewish inmates at a German labor camp to celebrate a Jewish holiday in the midst of oppression in the camp.

While writing in my small diary, where I had also recorded the Jewish festivals, I discovered to my great joy that Chanukah¹, the Festival of Lights, would begin in a few days. I decided that even in Nidrashal (a labor camp in the heart of Germany) we had to light Chanukah candles.

I immediately looked at Benzi, who had become the confidant of the inmates of the block. Benzi was enthusiastic about my idea: 'Yes, we have to light candles on Chanukah. It will raise the morale and improve the atmosphere. Make a plan, but be careful.'

Two problems had to be overcome: we had to get oil and we had to find a place where the light would not be seen. There was no lack of oil in the factory, but how could we smuggle it – even a few drops – to our hut in time for Monday evening, December 11, the first night of Chanukah?

We knew that according to religious law we were not obliged to risk our lives in order to observe a commandment. But many of us had the urge to display a spirit of sacrifice, the heritage of our forefathers throughout the ages. We were in such deep spiritual and physical depression that we felt that a small Chanukah candle would warm our dying souls and instill hope, faith and courage in us that would keep us alive during the long, harsh, and freezing winter.

We decided to draw lots. The first name that came up would be responsible for stealing the oil; the third would be responsible for hiding it until Monday evening, and the fifth would light it under his bunk. Mine was the fifth name drawn in the lottery. Grunwald, who was responsible for getting hold of the oil, did his job perfectly. He convinced the despised foreman that his machines would work better if they were oiled every morning, and for that purpose it would be a good idea if we were given a small jar

of quality machine oil to keep in our tool-box. The foreman agreed, and hiding the oil was no longer a problem.

When Monday arrived, I put the oil in the empty part of a tin of shoe-polish, removed a few threads from my thin blanket and made a wick. When everything was ready, I sat down to eat quickly and invited all of our comrades to participate in lighting the Chanukah candle. Suddenly I remembered that we had forgotten the matches. I whispered to Benzi, 'Everyone should leave a bit of soup.' Benzi ordered his hungry comrades at the table and explained the reason to them. Within five minutes, five portions of soup were exchanged for a cigarette in the next room. The cigarette was "presented" to the head of the kitchen in exchange for lending us a box of matches, no questions asked.

And so, after the meal, I recited the three blessings, and a small Chanukah candle slowly flickered under my bunk. Not only my friends from the religious table participated, but many others from the room joined in, humming Chanukah songs. It was as if before our very eyes we saw our homes, our parents, our brothers, our sisters, our wives and our children gathered around the beautiful silver Chanukah menorah, happily singing Maoz Zur (Rock of Ages). Tears ran down our sunken cheeks. Afterwards, each of the inmates in the room sat deep in thought on his bunk or near my bunk. For a moment it seemed as if nothing else was important to us. We had celebrated the first night of Chanukah as we had in all the years prior to our incarceration and torment. We were a group of Jews observing commandments and dreaming of our homes and years gone by."

Credit: From Eliav Mordechai, I Believe – Testimonies of the Lives and Death of Men of Faith during the Holocaust. Rabbi Kook Institute: Jerusalem, 1969 Translation from Circles: Dialogue with the past. Yad Vashem: Jerusalem, 2004. 7-8

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1. An eight-day Jewish holiday commemorating the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt of the 2nd century. The festival is observed by the kindling of the lights of a special candelabrum, the nine-branched *Menorah* or *Chanukiah*, one light on each night of the holiday, progressing to eight on the final night.

Photo Analysis

- 1 Where is this photo taken?
- 2 What elements of this photograph are surprising?
- 3 Notice the inmates' clothing. What can we infer from the clothing they are wearing?
- 4 Describe the inmates' facial expressions. Why do you think this moment is so meaningful for them?

Acts of Heroism Faith Belief in Spite of Darkness

Primary Source Analysis and Questions for Discussion:

- 1 What risk is involved in lighting Chanukah lights?
- 2 What were the two main problems needed to be resolved in order for the inmates to successfully light the Chanukah lights?
- 3 What was the holiday of Chanukah and the lessons behind the ancient story and customs especially significant to Jews living during the Holocaust?
- 4 Although the author and his comrades know that according to Jewish law one is not obligated to risk his life to fulfill one's obligation to light a menorah on Chanukah, they choose to do so in spite of the risk involved.
 - Why do you think they did this?
 - Have you ever taken a risk in defense of your own personal beliefs?
 - How did it make you feel?
- 5 Besides feeling accomplished after successfully lighting the candles, the author and his comrades feel many other emotions. What do they feel and why do you think lighting the candles ignited those feelings?
- 6 Why would the Nazis have banned communal prayer for the Jewish New Year?
- 7 Did the Jews abide by the Nazi prohibition against gathering for prayer?
- 8 How are the Jews of the ghetto similar to Marranos of the 15th century?
- 9 What is Yitzkhok Rudashevski surprised to see as he walks the streets of the Vilna ghetto on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year?
- 10 Do you think it is really plausible that in every home in the ghetto poverty has been swept away by the festive spirit of the holiday?
- 11 How are these festivities an act of defiance against the Nazis?
- 12 What does this diary entry teach us about the state of faith in the Vilna ghetto?
- 13 Lighting Chanukah candles, gathering for prayer on the Jewish High Holy Days, and celebrating the beginning of the Jewish year with festivities and fervor, all represent acts of Jewish spiritual resistance. How do the actions of the Jews in each of these circumstances represent heroism?

Spiritual Resistance: Opposition to the Nazis using religious beliefs to defy Nazi oppression. Acts of spiritual resistance included maintaining religious customs such as rites of passage, holidays, dietary laws, prayers, establishing clandestine schools for religious studies. Despite Nazi efforts to ban and suppress religious practice, Jews continued to risk their lives to maintain and cultivate their religious beliefs and practices. This form of resistance gave purpose to those who survived and gave dignity to those who did not.

Excerpt from the Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan

On the New Year¹ we prayed illegally. The ban on communal worship was still in effect. In secret, in side rooms near the dark, closed synagogues we prayed to the God of Israel like Marranos² in the fifteenth century. But one day before the eve of the Day of Atonement³ permission for communal worship. This permission was not unconditional, however. It is still forbidden to pray publicly in

synagogues, and they remain locked. The law was relaxed only to permit communal worship in small groups in private homes, on condition that they don't make noise and that there is no crowding. The Jewish community of Warsaw left nothing out in its prayers, but poured its supplications before its Father in Heaven in accordance with the ancient custom of Israel.

Credit: KAPLAN, CHAIM AHARON. *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Ghetto Diary of Chaim Kaplan*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999. 207.

1. Rosh Hashanah 2. The term used to describe crypto-Jews who forcibly converted to Christianity during the time of the Spanish persecution of Jews in the 14th century, but retained a Jewish identity and Jewish customs in the secrecy of their homes. 3. Yom Kippur

Excerpt from the diary of Yitzkhok Rudashevski of the Vilna ghetto in Lithuania

Saturday the 12th [September 1942]

Today is a holiday. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. It is a cool day, like all other days recently. The sky is clear. In the morning I go down to the street. A holiday spirit that is anything but cheerful is diffused over the few little ghetto streets. Something somehow

is missing. I am reminded of the past. From somewhere a sound of loud, quick praying is heard. Here and there Jewish women walk past with festive kerchiefs on their heads, with prayer books under their arms. I recalled my grandmother, how she too used to go to synagogue this way once a year [. . .]

It is twilight. I go out into the street. The streets are lively. People are walking around dressed up. Today is a holiday. This is evident in every house you enter; the poverty has been scrubbed away. Formerly, this would not have made an impression on me. However, now I felt strangely good because the everyday, gray day is so much in need

of a little holiday spirit, which should drive away for a while the gray commonplaceness of life. People walked around until late on the little Vilna ghetto streets. A strangely sad holiday mood. And now the crowds thin out more and more. A cold starry sky overhead. From time to time a star flies past across the sky on its silvery way and suddenly falls down [. . .]

Zapruder, Alexandra, editor. *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002. 206, 210, 217.



This photo was taken at the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands. This camp was originally established by the Dutch government as a camp for housing illegal refugees fleeing Nazi occupied territories. However, from 1942 to 1944, Westerbork became a transit camp housing Dutch Jews before they were deported to extermination camps. There were some inmates who had temporarily been exempt from deportations that were imprisoned at Westerbork for an extended period of time.

Credit: Yad Vashem Photo Archive Westerbork transit camp, The Netherlands Lighting Chanukah Candles