

Universiteit van Amsterdam

# Was God Behind the Barbed Wire?

## An Inquiry into Jewish Faith and Practice in Auschwitz



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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates the persistence of religious practice and faith among Jewish inmates in the Auschwitz death camp. The paper focuses on how and why Jews observed religious commandments; the role of rabbis within the camp in offering guidance and support to fellow Jewish prisoners; the way in which religious inmates interpreted their suffering; and the effects of religiosity on the inmates. This study is based mostly on the examination of survivor testimonies, as well as scholarly works. This thesis has found that many Jews continued to observe religious commandments inside the camp despite the risks; and that rabbis played an important role in the camps by providing theodicies that buttressed the faith of many inmates. The experience at Auschwitz had different effects on the religious faith of Jewish inmates – some maintained their belief and others lost it, but the majority oscillated between these two stances. At the time, Jewish prisoners interpreted God's role in their suffering in a variety of ways; and, ultimately, religious observance and faith seem to have had significant positive effects on the prisoner's mental well-being and overall camp experience. In short, Jewish faith and practice persisted in Auschwitz in complex and fluctuating ways.

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*The beginning, the end: All the world's roads, all the outcries of mankind,  
lead to this haunted place unlike any other. Here is the kingdom of night.  
Where God's face is hidden and a flaming sky becomes  
an accursed graveyard for a vanished people.<sup>1</sup>*

– Elie Wiesel on Auschwitz-Birkenau

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<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Pilgrimage to the Country of Night," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1979.

## INTRODUCTION

During the Holocaust, European Jewry strove to maintain its Jewish identity and to carry on Jewish communal life in the ghettos and even in the camps.<sup>2</sup> Of course, each individual interpreted ‘Jewish life’ differently, but for the overwhelming majority religion was a major element of such a life. Some scholars of theology, like Professor Richard Rubenstein, have argued that the horror of the Holocaust denies any possibility of religious faith – “How is life with God still possible in a time in which there is Auschwitz?”<sup>3</sup> Yet survivor testimony reveals time and time again that life with God was indeed possible, even in the darkest of places – the Nazi death camp. This thesis will investigate the presence of Judaism within Auschwitz; how the camp experience brought about religious change and what inmates thought about their religious tradition, its teachings and doctrines during their incarceration. It will look at the persistence of ritual observance; the role of the religious leadership inside the camp; and the complex processes religious faith underwent.

This thesis will also trace and analyse the different meanings of the Holocaust, as they were understood by Auschwitz prisoners at the time of the ordeal; that is, the thought processes and beliefs that developed from primary experiences, which have no direct ties to the larger theological questions that have been developed over the decades since the event. In fact, even when they give their testimony later on, most Holocaust survivors are far removed from formal theological discourse.<sup>4</sup> Overall, this investigation seeks to document the presence of Jewish religiosity within Auschwitz; to consider what religious faith and observance meant to inmates during that period, and, finally, to evaluate the impact that continuing one’s religious life in some form could have on the lives of the Jewish Auschwitz prisoners.

This thesis considers Jews religious if they define themselves as religious or as believers in God in a way that they regard as Jewish – the extent of their observance of commandments is not a criterion here. Consequently, this category includes the Orthodox and Liberal (or Reform) streams of Judaism. It should be noted, then, that the Jews studied here ranged from the deeply religious and unassimilated to the most thoroughly acculturated members of the national culture in which they lived. Even once they reached Auschwitz,

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<sup>2</sup> Meir Dworzecki, “The Day-to-Day Stand of the Jews,” in *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Conference on Manifestations of Jewish Resistance, Jerusalem, April 7-11, 1968* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1971), 160

<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber, *At the Turning: Three Addresses on Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Young, 1952), 61.

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Hass, *The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 151.

there was great diversity in Jewish traditions and the variety of circumstances under which Jews found themselves during the Holocaust.

This study focuses on the Auschwitz concentration and death camp, but it does not suggest that it was an exception within the camp system. Indeed, we know that what Jews did in Auschwitz they did in other camps as well, to different extents.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the discussion will focus on aspects pertaining to ritual observance and religious faith – the relationship of man to God. It will not deal with moral questions regarding the relation of man to man, although this is another major component of Jewish spirituality.

The Holocaust rocked the very foundations of Judaism – it was only natural that questions would arise about God and His providence.<sup>6</sup> To this day, the Holocaust is central to Jewish thought and faith.<sup>7</sup> Research has found that the Holocaust affected the faith and observance of survivors in various and substantial ways.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that the Jews from the most religious circles who strictly observed the commandments and were not well assimilated, had the least chance of surviving the German occupation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we may assume that the Jews who survived the Holocaust were proportionately much less religious than those who lost their lives.<sup>10</sup>

The period immediately after liberation was also traumatic for survivors. Physical rehabilitation was the first imperative, combined with a tremendous desire to locate surviving relatives.<sup>11</sup> At this time, religion was far from an urgent concern. Later on, once they found out the true magnitude of the Holocaust, Jews were deeply shocked – a third of their people had perished. 1.5 million Jewish children were slaughtered and entire communities were wiped out.<sup>12</sup> For most survivors, the experience of the Holocaust was perceived as profoundly dissonant with much of what they had believed prior the war – meaning that they had to

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<sup>5</sup> Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Death Camps* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Michman, “The Impact of the Holocaust on Religious Jewry,” in *Major Changes within the Jewish People in the Wake of the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Ninth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, ed. Yisrael Gutman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1996), 687.

<sup>7</sup> Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” in *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, eds. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1989), 317.

<sup>8</sup> Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 172.

<sup>9</sup> August Grabski and Albert Stankowski, “Jewish Religious Life in Poland after the Holocaust,” in *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944-2010*, eds. Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska and Feliks Tych (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 247.

<sup>10</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Michman, “The Impact,” 665.

<sup>12</sup> John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, ““Where is God Now?”” in *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, eds. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1989), 261.

either change their beliefs or recommit themselves to their former faith.<sup>13</sup> The Holocaust raised existential questions which would distress Jews for years to come.<sup>14</sup> In light of the death camps, accepting normative Jewish theology meant accepting that God had sent Hitler to murder six million of His people.<sup>15</sup> Following this logic, many Jews felt indignation or rage towards the Creator. As Romanian-born survivor, writer, and Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel admitted: “I was angry at God...How could He have abandoned His people just at the moment when they needed Him? How could He have delivered them to the killers?”<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, though, not all survivors are of one mind about the meaning of the Holocaust and its impact. Most do in fact view it as a transformational event, but still, a number of individuals felt that their faith and/or religious behaviour remained largely unchanged.<sup>17</sup>

American rabbi and author, Reeve Robert Brenner reported there was a significant decline in religious observance among the survivor community in the period immediately after the Holocaust. Decades later, there was a partial return to Jewish religious activity.<sup>18</sup> The majority of survivors who reported changes in their level of observance directly attributed them to the impact of the Holocaust.<sup>19</sup> Brenner also found that the more observant survivors had been before the Holocaust, the more likely they were to remain observant afterwards, and the less observant they had been, the greater the likelihood of them becoming non-observant.<sup>20</sup> Some observant survivors spoke of continuing their religious practice, but doing so with attenuated faith or with diminished enthusiasm.<sup>21</sup> When most of their past had been taken away from them, traditional observances allowed many survivors to feel close to those they had lost, and to retain a sense of community – so observance often continued without belief.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg, “The Holocaust Survivor’s Faith and Religious Behaviour and some Implications for Treatment,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 3, no. 4 (1988): 416.

<sup>14</sup> Gershon Greenberg, “Orthodox Jewish Thought in the Wake of the Holocaust,” in *In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 320.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 140.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “Holocaust Survivor’s Faith,” 416.

<sup>18</sup> 55% of survivors were classified as having been observant before the Holocaust; immediately after the Holocaust, only 34% were classified as observant, with the number increasing to 43% by the 1970s. See Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 153.

When asked about religious faith, almost half of survivors (47%) stated that the Holocaust had no influence on their beliefs about God.<sup>23</sup> The remaining 53% specifically asserted that the Holocaust had affected or modified their faith in God – ¾ of them reported either a complete loss or an attenuation of faith had resulted, and ¼ said they were brought “nearer to God.”<sup>24</sup> For many Jews in the former category, the Holocaust was proof that God did not exist, because if He did exist, then He would have certainly prevented Auschwitz.<sup>25</sup> Overall, it may be said that the Holocaust worked more to undermine than to strengthen the faith of survivors. Indeed, Brenner reported that faith declined as a later consequence of the devastation, as well as during the event; and belief in the major tenets of Judaism (e.g. the ‘chosenness’ of Israel) never reverted back to their pre-Holocaust levels.<sup>26</sup> While levels of faith may have declined, the Nazi experience gave many Jews a renewed sense of collective uniqueness, making them fervently embrace their Jewish identity.<sup>27</sup> Several survivors have spoken of the need to respond to the Holocaust with Jewish affirmation, in order to avoid giving Hitler a posthumous victory.<sup>28</sup>

## Historiography

Despite the vast amount of research literature on the Holocaust, Jewish religious life during the period was neglected for decades. The problem of religious adherence and faith in relation to the Holocaust was only really explored from the perspective of post-Holocaust religious coping with the meaning and comprehension of the event. Many Jewish theologians have contended with issues surrounding the Holocaust, such as the problem of abandonment and divine absence.<sup>29</sup> There is a near-consensus that the Holocaust, and its implications for theology, cannot possibly be ignored – Jews cannot continue living their religion as if the event made no difference.<sup>30</sup> Many Jewish thinkers believe that if Judaism does not confront and account for the Holocaust, it ignores the realities of human history, and thus the religion will lose credibility.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, debate continues on the questions that surfaced during the tragedy – is it possible, or how is it possible, to maintain a belief in divine providence based

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<sup>23</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 95.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>25</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “Holocaust Survivor’s Faith,” 420.

<sup>26</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 162, 201.

<sup>27</sup> Michman, “The Impact,” 689.

<sup>28</sup> Emil Fackenheim, “The 614<sup>th</sup> Commandment,” in *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, eds. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1989), 294.

<sup>29</sup> Roth and Berenbaum, “Where is God Now?” 262.

<sup>30</sup> Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke,” 317.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

on justice and reward, after what happened during the Holocaust?<sup>32</sup> While contemporary reflections on such questions have received much attention, relatively few scholars have looked at the responses formulated by ordinary Jewish victims during the ordeal itself.

Research has analysed the “coping with the Holocaust” in the context of Judaism at the philosophical-theological level, but much less attention has been paid to the social and individual levels:<sup>33</sup> how individuals and small groups dealt with the dissonance between what they were experiencing, and what they believed to be true as told by their religious tradition. Post-Holocaust theology literature occasionally mentions a considerable number of anecdotes and stories about the religious life and behaviour of ordinary Jews during the Holocaust, but these cases are not discussed systematically.<sup>34</sup>

This is all the more remarkable because the Nazi concentration camps may have been places where religious faith reached its highest manifestations. Survivor testimonies have awarded great significance to the religious dimension of the camp life.<sup>35</sup> American Holocaust scholar David Patterson explained that God dominates the survivor’s memoir, both in the memory of God and the longing for the benevolent God that was lost. He argued that the essence of God in the memoir is to be a question without answer.<sup>36</sup> This reflects the importance which religion retained for the Auschwitz prisoner. The Israeli-French historian, Saul Friedländer insisted on the importance of trying to understand the experiences of Holocaust victims;<sup>37</sup> as testimony reveals, religion remained an important element of the inmates’ experience of Auschwitz. So it is regrettable that religious life during the Holocaust is often overlooked by scholars, especially since before the war, the religious community constituted a prominent element within the general Jewish population in Europe.<sup>38</sup> In short, because of how prominently God and faith feature in victim testimony, the central status of religion in Jewish nationhood, and the fact that a large proportion of the victim population

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<sup>32</sup> Eliezer Schweid, “The Justification for Religion in the Crisis of the Holocaust,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 3, no. 4 (1988): 395.

<sup>33</sup> Michman, “The Impact,” 673.

<sup>34</sup> Dan Michman, “Jewish Religious Life under Nazi domination: Nazi attitudes and Jewish Problems,” *Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (1993): 148.

<sup>35</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “Holocaust Survivor’s Faith,” 413.

<sup>36</sup> David Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness: Memory and Recovery in the Holocaust Memoir* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 79-81.

<sup>37</sup> Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945* (London, 2007), xv.

<sup>38</sup> Dan Michamn, “Research on the Problems and Conditions of Religious Jewry under the Nazi Regime,” in *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period: Proceedings of the Fifth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, March 1983*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Gideon Greif (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988), 742.

was made up of religious Jews – around half of the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis were Orthodox,<sup>39</sup> the study of religious life during the Holocaust is of particular importance.

In his early writings, in 1957, Israeli-Polish historian and Holocaust survivor, Yisrael Gutman asserted that all signs of religion and open religious practices were suppressed in Auschwitz.<sup>40</sup> Today we know that was not the case. Whereas widespread discussion of the Holocaust and its moral, social, and theological implications began in the 1970s,<sup>41</sup> only in the 1980s did Jewish religious life during the Holocaust receive proper attention.<sup>42</sup> Nowadays, many scholars touch on the religious realm – from the particular questions of religious rites and practices under extraordinary circumstances, to the wide theological interpretations of the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup>

Representative works dealing with the issue of Jewish religious existence during the Holocaust include the following. Romanian-Israeli rabbi and theologian Eliezer Berkovits wrote *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Death Camps* (1979), in which he challenged the widespread notion that religious faith is impossible after the Holocaust by documenting the persistence of faith and observance among the Jews who found themselves in the most trying circumstances.<sup>44</sup> In 1980, Brenner published *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*, based on the results of a survey carried out in Israel on 608 survivors. Brenner's book was the first to add the voice of survivors themselves to the discussion, by asking them systematically how their experience affected their beliefs.<sup>45</sup> Brenner found that survivors living in Israel were not of one mind about the implications of the Holocaust, and that pre-Holocaust religious faith and habits of observance proved to be rather durable, despite the upheavals in the individual's life.<sup>46</sup>

Two years later, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (1982) by Polish-American historian, Yaffa Eliach included stories told by Hasidic Jews who survived the Holocaust about how they thought about and experienced religion at that time.<sup>47</sup> Rabbi and University Professor Daniel Landes wrote "Spiritual Responses in the Camps," as part of his co-edited book, *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust* (1983). It presented many examples of how

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<sup>39</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, "Holocaust Survivor's Faith," 414.

<sup>40</sup> Michman, "Jewish Religious Life," 163.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Kinnamon, review of *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*, by Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Journal of Religion* 61, no. 3 (1981): 328.

<sup>42</sup> Michman, "Research," 745

<sup>43</sup> Emil Kerenji, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, vol. IV: 1942-1943* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 442.

<sup>44</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*.

<sup>45</sup> Kinnamon, review, 328-329.

<sup>46</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*.

<sup>47</sup> Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).

religious faith and observance were an integral part of life for some concentration camp inmates.<sup>48</sup> Later, Israeli historian Dan Michman's article "Jewish Religious Life under Nazi Domination: Nazi attitudes and Jewish problems" (1993) he argued that Jewish religious practice persisted under the Nazis, even inside the camps, in part thanks to the racial character of Nazi anti-Semitism. That is, because the Nazis were not against Judaism as a religion, Jews had some leeway to continue practicing it.<sup>49</sup> This particular view was challenged by Canadian Holocaust scholar, Doris Bergen, who argued that scientific racism did not replace old religious hatreds, but added new layers on top of them and that ultimately this was what distinguished Jews from the broader European populace in the first place was religion.<sup>50</sup>

Reeve Brenner's study has great value in having been the first to incorporate the voices of survivors into the theological discussions of the Holocaust, giving it great authenticity. This thesis found that during their ordeal Auschwitz inmates had very diverse opinions and attitudes towards Judaism; this supports Brenner's argument that Holocaust survivors did not share a single vision over the event's meaning and impact later on. Nevertheless, Brenner's methodology raises the question of whether one can meaningfully quantify religious faith and belief in specific doctrines. It actually seems unlikely, which lends to the criticism that Brenner's levels of belief intensity and religious observance are somewhat arbitrary. Brenner claims to have chosen to carry out his study in Israel because it is a 'religiously neutral' state, when, in fact, Judaism has become thoroughly ethnicized and incorporated into the national life of Israel.<sup>51</sup> The issues raised by this thesis were significantly influenced by Brenner's discussion, and his study's recollection of testimonies provided much source material. His book is most valuable if one focuses on these aspects; but the specific statistics it presents should be approached with caution. Finally, Brenner states from the outset that he found no correlation between religious change and whether the individual spent any time in a Nazi concentration or death camp.<sup>52</sup> However, he fails to explain how he reached this conclusion, which leaves many doubts.

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel Landes, "Spiritual Responses in the Camps," in *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*, eds. Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes (Los Angeles: The Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1983).

<sup>49</sup> Michman, "Jewish Religious Life".

<sup>50</sup> Doris Bergen, "Religion and the Holocaust: Some Reflections," in *Lessons and Legacies, vol. IV: Reflections on Religion, Justice, Sexuality and Genocide*, ed. Larry Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003): 42.

<sup>51</sup> Benny Kraut, "Faith and the Holocaust," review of *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*, by Reeve Robert Brenner, *Judaism* 31, no. 2 (1982): 198.

<sup>52</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 22.

Eliezer Berkovits successfully challenged the notion that religiosity could not exist within the boundaries of the ghettos and camps. His book documented that many Jews maintained their faith and continued their observance even in those trying circumstances. As will become evident, the findings of this thesis fit in very well with Berkovits' descriptions of the essence of Jewish faith as trust and the relationship between the Jew and God, and these concepts constitute a useful lens through which to interpret survivor testimony. The findings of this thesis give significant credence to the idea put forward by Berkovits that religion may have reached its highest manifestations within the confines of death camps.

Unfortunately, Berkovits vests too much authority on the question of the authenticity and accuracy of the testimonies he presents – ultimately leading to the book's major weakness being its reliability. For example, Berkovits refers to Yossel Rakover as an "authentic Jew" and extensively quotes his testimony (said to have been found in a bottle among the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto). In fact, Yossel Rakover was a fictitious character, made up for a newspaper article; no Holocaust victim with that name existed, and, of course, the account attributed to him does not constitute an authentic testimony.<sup>53</sup> Most of the other stories presented by Berkovits are more likely true, but he nevertheless fails to properly document them.

## **Background**

### *European Jewry before the Holocaust*

Prior to World War II, European Jews were, overall, a religiously observant community.<sup>54</sup> Even the more secular Jews who did not follow the dictates of Jewish law were still psychologically tied to a sense of peoplehood through their identification with Jewish tradition and culture.<sup>55</sup> Still, the Jews of 1930s Europe were by no means a unified monolith – in Eastern and central Europe, a large majority remained strictly Orthodox; in Western Europe and the Soviet Union, many were thoroughly secularized; and across the board there were the semi-traditional who were comfortably selective in their degree of religious practice.<sup>56</sup> As heterogeneous culturally, politically and nationally as most European Jews

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<sup>53</sup> Braiterman, "Anti/theodicy," 99.

<sup>54</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 37.

<sup>55</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 143.

<sup>56</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War* (London: Profile Books, 2012), xix.

were, they nevertheless shared a worldview that drew on the reservoir of a distant but common Jewish past.<sup>57</sup>

Eastern Europe had been the heartland of Jewish settlement since the early modern period, and remained so by 1939. Over half of Europe's 10 million Jews lived in the states between Germany and the USSR. Poland hosted the largest Jewish community in the continent, numbered at 3.2 million in 1939. Romania and Hungary also had very large Jewish populations.<sup>58</sup> Eastern European Jews spoke Yiddish, lived in dense concentrations and held closely to their cultural patterns. While in Western Europe, where Jews had mostly assimilated into national culture, Judaism was seen solely as a religion, Eastern European Jews tended to regard their Jewishness primarily as an ethnic category.<sup>59</sup> The Orthodox majority there had developed a religious life of scrupulous piety and meticulous observance; they sought to protect this lifestyle by isolating themselves from the currents of modernity and, consequently, from broader society.<sup>60</sup> Within Eastern European countries, Jewish communities enjoyed a great deal of autonomy; and Judaism continued to permeate all spheres of public and private life, blurring the line which separated the 'religious' from the 'secular' realms of Jewish societies.<sup>61</sup> Most Jews understood and gladly accepted the ultimate value of Judaism and the covenant between their people and God; the Jewish tradition gave them a sense of security, confidence, and trust in their community and their experiences.<sup>62</sup>

*Auschwitz: "microcosm of absolute evil"*<sup>63</sup>

Established in May 1940, near the Polish town of Oswiecim, Auschwitz was the largest of the Nazi concentration camps. With the expansion and development of the camp complex, Auschwitz and its satellites encompassed over forty camps over a vast industrial area. The camps served as a huge pool of forced labour for the German war effort. In October 1941, the construction of mass extermination facilities, in what would become Auschwitz II-Birkenau, began. From spring 1942, the site became the centrepiece for the "Final Solution of the

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<sup>57</sup> Kerenji, *Jewish Responses*, 443.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel Landes, "The Holocaust and Israel," in *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*, eds. Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes (Los Angeles: The Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1983), 426.

<sup>61</sup> Kerenji, *Jewish Responses*, 443.

<sup>62</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 243.

<sup>63</sup> Filip Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando*, trans. Susanne Flatauer (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 1.

Jewish Question”; it remained so until the camp’s evacuation and liquidation, which started on January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1945.<sup>64</sup>

From May 1940 to January 1945, a total of 405,000 prisoners, both male and female, were registered into the camp – about 200,000 of them died during their incarceration.<sup>65</sup> An estimated 1 million Jews were murdered in the gas chambers upon arrival; their bodies were incinerated, without the victims ever being registered.<sup>66</sup> The exact number of dead is unknown because the Nazis destroyed the documents recording these figures. A widely accepted calculation by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum found that at least 1.1 million victims died, with 90% of them being Jews.<sup>67</sup> As for living conditions of Jewish prisoners in the camp, those were generally much harsher than those of other national and ethnic groups, and their mortality rate was, consequently, higher.<sup>68</sup>

With the establishment of the ‘death factory’ in Birkenau, from late March, 1942, mass deportations of Jews from Nazi-occupied countries or satellites of the Third Reich to Auschwitz began. Most transports carried entire families, who were uprooted from their residences as part of the plan to entirely eradicate Jewish communities, whose only offence was their “racial” and national origin.<sup>69</sup> An estimated 1,095,190 Jews were sent to Auschwitz, making up the largest group of deportees. They originated from almost every country in Europe; the largest numbers came from Hungary (438,000), and Poland (300,000).<sup>70</sup>

Setting foot in Auschwitz seemingly marked a radical and irrevocable departure from one’s previous, normal existence.<sup>71</sup> According to German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky, Nazi concentration and death camps constituted a universe of terror – a world in which not only were barbarism and violence the norm, but also in which the inmates’ lives were governed by a mechanism of absolute force, that denuded them of every social dimension, effectively turning them into a homogenous group.<sup>72</sup> Nazi camps were deliberately designed so as to eradicate all marks of individual identity. Polish Rabbi Baruch Marzel recalled that at the

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<sup>64</sup> Yisrael Gutman, “Auschwitz – An Overview,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1994), 6-19.

<sup>65</sup> Gutman, “Auschwitz,” 6.

<sup>66</sup> Gutman, “Auschwitz,” 7.

<sup>67</sup> Franciszek Piper, “The Number of Victims,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1994), 61-62.

<sup>68</sup> Gutman, “Auschwitz,” 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Piper, “Number,” 68.

<sup>71</sup> Gutman, “Auschwitz,” 19.

<sup>72</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 17-28.

moment of arrival in Auschwitz, the world became bereft of all points of reference of the previous social order and of individuality:

The train door opened...all my previous life was wiped out in that single moment. Everything became equal...the religious person and...those who had become completely assimilated – all found themselves within hours... identical in appearance, in dress, in their suffering, their fate, distinguished only in the numbers tattooed on their arms.<sup>73</sup>

This process relentlessly continued – the subject was objectified, humiliated and brutalized. Their bodies were starved, broken, profaned; their minds, hollowed out. The eradication of personal space by the overcrowded conditions also served the strategy of dehumanization.<sup>74</sup> With their space, time, bodies and minds all violently ripped away from them, inmates eventually lost consciousness of their own selves and others. Hungarian Jewess Naomi Asmel remembers of the time she spent in Auschwitz: “They broke us and suddenly I could not remember anything. I did not remember that I used to be at home, nothing...we didn’t know one another.”<sup>75</sup>

The American writer and Holocaust scholar, Terrence Des Pres coined the phrase “excremental assault” to summarize the Nazis’ attempt to destroy the Jew’s soul even before killing them physically; it was a relentless attack on the prisoner’s sense of purity and worth, through terror and deprivation.<sup>76</sup> Thus, the Jewish inmate in Auschwitz had to face a merciless attack on their moral being and sense of selfhood.

To this end, the camps were deliberately designed to destroy the life and autonomy of the inmates. Norwegian psychiatrist and survivor himself, Leo Eitinger held that the stay in Auschwitz was beyond human comprehension.<sup>77</sup> The separation from loved ones and the loss of everything that had been precious to them (i.e. their homes, communities), left many prisoners experiencing intense despair, abandonment and isolation, as well as a strong sense of hopelessness.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the spiritual and physical violence, as well as the perpetual fear

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<sup>73</sup> Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 30.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-72.

<sup>75</sup> Moriya Rachmani, “Testimonies, Liminality Rituals and the Memory of the Self in the Concentration Camps,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* (2016): 15.

<sup>76</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 66.

<sup>77</sup> Leo Eitinger, “Auschwitz – A Psychological Perspective,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1994), 470.

<sup>78</sup> Sheryl Robbin, “Life in the Camps: The Psychological Dimension,” in *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*, eds. Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes (Los Angeles: The Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1983), 237.

and appalling physical conditions contributed for many to a lack of self-care and self-worth.<sup>79</sup> Every day in the life of the Auschwitz inmate was filled with unbearable tension and superhuman effort, emotional turmoil and terror, continuing without respite. Days were hollow, and enveloped in an everlasting gloom. Under the constant shadow of death, the Jewish inmates experienced radical insecurity and could never lower their guard and, despite the exhaustion, had to maintain permanent vigilance. The food available provided almost no nourishment, and hunger was an additional source of endless torment and anguish.<sup>80</sup> Fear, sadness, and anger were common emotions experienced in the face of the rapid disintegration of one's known world.<sup>81</sup>

Brenner, like many others who have done research on survivors, claimed that it was impossible to come out of the concentration camps psychologically and spiritually intact.<sup>82</sup> Des Pres noted that camp life often led to "personality disintegration" for many prisoners – a process whereby the usual coherence of an individual's actions, thoughts and self-perception is destroyed.<sup>83</sup> Personality reintegration required a conscious decision to retain one's dignity.<sup>84</sup>

The Nazis maintained a network of thousands of camps across occupied Europe, including annihilation camps (*Vernichtungslager*), transit camps (*Judendurchgangslager*), labour camps, and detention camps.<sup>85</sup> These all operated under different conditions and circumstances – for example, German policies tended to be much more lenient in Western Europe than in the camps in the East.<sup>86</sup> In Auschwitz, and other annihilation camps, most Jews did not live for more than a few hours or days, and an extreme regime of terror was in place. In other camps, mainly transit camps or remote labour camps, conditions were more favourable for religious practice. For example, in the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands, religious services were held by both Orthodox and Liberal Jews, a rabbinate performed marriages, circumcisions were carried out, and Passover was still openly kept in 1944.<sup>87</sup> This would have been impossible in Auschwitz, where the eradication of any sign or

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<sup>79</sup> Robbin, "Life in the Camps," 237.

<sup>80</sup> Gutman, "Auschwitz," 19.

<sup>81</sup> Kerenji, *Jewish Responses*, 421.

<sup>82</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 28.

<sup>83</sup> Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 81-108.

<sup>84</sup> Robbin, "Life in the Camps," 238.

<sup>85</sup> Michman, "Jewish Religious Life," 163.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

expression of Judaism was a fundamental component of the Nazi design to destroy the identity of the Jewish inmates.<sup>88</sup>

## Methodology

The thesis will study the religious dimension within the daily life of Auschwitz prisoners. As such, it constitutes *Alltagsgeschichte* – a form of a microstudy, focusing on the history of ‘everyday life’ – and its approach is mostly victim-centred. Spiritual responses within concentration and death camps are very difficult to analyse; in general, unlike in the case of the ghettos, there are no contemporaneous diaries, journals, newspapers or other sources from the camps.<sup>89</sup>

The investigation will be largely based on the testimony of former Auschwitz inmates, years after their liberation. These include written and verbal testimony from the survivors themselves – for example, memoirs like *Night* (2006), by Elie Wiesel,<sup>90</sup> and *Auschwitz Inferno: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando* (1979), by the Slovakian Jew, Filip Müller;<sup>91</sup> as well as video interviews from the *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*. Articles, books, and studies containing collections of testimonies dealing with religious life and faith during the Holocaust, or specifically in the concentration and death camps are also used.<sup>92</sup>

As mentioned, the memory of God and of the prayer seeking God is a definitive feature of the survivor’s memoir. The types of belief expressed in testimony are within the realm of primary experience, beyond all theology. Corroboration cannot be obtained for many of the stories told in these testimonies.

Many questions can be raised regarding the reliability of personal testimony – indeed, caution is quite justified. In the early twentieth century, German-American psychologist, Hugo Munsterberg asserted that even the best-intentioned witnesses are fallible, and enormous error can occur when individuals attempt to recall something from the past. Since then, countless studies have confirmed that a person’s perceptual and memorial systems do not passively record and store information from the violent environment, but are shaped by a

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<sup>88</sup> Paul and Marcus, “The Value of Religion,” 91.

<sup>89</sup> Landes, “Spiritual Responses,” 261.

<sup>90</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

<sup>91</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*.

<sup>92</sup> Such works include Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*; Marcus and Rosenberg, *Holocaust Survivor’s Faith*; Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion in Sustaining the Self in Extreme Situations,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 82, no. 1 (1995); Rachmani, “Liminality Rituals”; Moriya Rachmani, “Ritual Existence and Preservation of Self-Identity in Concentration Camps: Time, Body and Objects,” *American Imago* 73, no. 1 (2016); Berkovits, *With God in Hell*.

multiplicity of factors, including frequency of the event witnessed, its complexity, its seriousness and its level of violence.<sup>93</sup> Needless to say, these elements affected the cognitive abilities of camp prisoners.

However, American historian Christopher Browning has argued that recording history is important even in cases in which no official documents exist and survivors' testimonies constitute the only source available.<sup>94</sup> American Professor of English and Judaic Studies, James Young also holds that when taking on a victim-centred approach to history, no source is as meaningful as victim testimony, since "no document can be more historically authentic than that embodying the victims' grasp of events at the time."<sup>95</sup> Likewise, American Holocaust scholar, Lawrence Langer stresses the importance of testimonies, in that they reveal layers of knowledge that are inaccessible from any other source.<sup>96</sup>

There is a tendency to regard 'later' testimonies, like those used in this study, as less accurate or authentic than 'earlier' testimonies, given during or immediately after an event. On the other hand, many scholars argue that later testimonies are equally or more valid, taking into account that when faced with testimonies of trauma, survivors can only relate certain things at a distance from the event. This is especially true in the case of interpretations of experiences, or 'explanations' of modes of survival, which often can only be expressed at a temporal distance from the actual situation.<sup>97</sup> Also, as Brenner explains, the individual may not be conscious of undergoing religious change at the moment in time in which it is occurring. Reconstructions and efforts at recollection after the fact have their advantages: greater detachment, objectivity, and more insight into the long-range impacts of said changes.<sup>98</sup>

American Historian Dominick LaCapra argues that survivors' testimonies relate their interpretation of their experiences; whether this account is an accurate enactment of what actually occurred does not invalidate a testimony in its entirety.<sup>99</sup> In this sense, the

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<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth F. Loftus, 'Eyewitness Testimony: Psychological Research and Legal Thought', *Crime and Justice*, 3 (1981), 105-110.

<sup>94</sup> Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

<sup>95</sup> James Young, "Between History and Memory: The Uncanny Voice of the Historian and the Survivor", *History and Memory* 9, nos. 1-2 (1997), 56.

<sup>96</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), xv.

<sup>97</sup> Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, eds. Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (New York: Routledge, 1992): 83-86.

<sup>98</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 87.

<sup>99</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historian's Debate," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Massachusetts, 1992), 108-127.

testimonies are quite appropriate for this study, as religiosity and faith are inward stances. At issue is how the Jewish prisoner experienced them internally. Moreover, as Brenner points out, most survivors have no difficulty in designating an approximate time in which their religious change took place – in fact, they recall with remarkable accuracy and vividness what went on in their minds and hearts during the ordeal.<sup>100</sup>

Like any investigation based on testimonies, this thesis is limited by the questions of accuracy and selection. A tiny minority of Jews who experienced Auschwitz survived it; of these, few witnesses wrote or publicly spoke about their experience, not all texts were preserved, and very importantly, the post-war testimonies and memoirs available are the work of survivors, and certainly do not represent the beliefs of those who were murdered.<sup>101</sup> This thesis is based on testimonies produced in English, or subsequently translated into the English language. This thesis is a historical investigation; the author has approached the issues raised here from the background of a historian, not a theologian or a psychologist. Consequently, the discussion not deal with the implications of the Holocaust for Judaism at large.

## Structure

The first chapter will look at religious practice in Auschwitz – that is, the observance of commandments according to Jewish law. These include daily rituals such as prayer (individual and communal), dietary restrictions, and religious learning and teaching. It will also analyse how female prisoners observed Judaism differently because of the gendered nature of Jewish religious practice. Moreover, the chapter will deal with the celebration of religious festivals and High Holy Days (i.e. the *Sabbath*, *Yom Kippur*), and how these gained more significance even though these often had to be adapted. It will also touch on the role of ritual objects and the possible motivations of inmates to continue observing Jewish law even in those circumstances. Finally, it will assess the positive effects of ritual observance.

The second chapter will examine the role of rabbis inside Auschwitz – what they did, what they said; and what they could possibly do buttress the faith and self-identity of their fellow prisoners. First, it will look into the attitudes embodied by rabbis in the camp, and how they maintained their religious faith. It will then discuss the efforts made by rabbis to uphold religious faith and observance among other prisoners. Moreover, it will analyse the theological explanations rabbis offered for what we now call the Holocaust, and the

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<sup>100</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 88.

<sup>101</sup> Natalia Aleksion, “Survivor Testimonies and Historical Objectivity: Polish Historiography since *Neighbors*,” *Holocaust Studies* 20:1-2 (2014): 161.

difficulties in convincing others of them. Furthermore, the chapter will analyse the spiritual role taken on by non-rabbis within Auschwitz.

The third chapter will deal with the religious faith of Auschwitz prisoners. Firstly, it will consider the challenges that the experience in Auschwitz posed to the traditional Jewish conception of an omnipotent, benevolent God. Moreover, it will analyse prisoners who maintained their faith, or even strengthened it. It will also examine the intense questioning of God by inmates, and prisoners who abandoned or denied their faith. It will also discuss how faith could be continuously lost and recovered; and which particular events or situations triggered each process. Finally, it will examine the benefits enjoyed from maintaining religious faith.

## **CHAPTER 1: RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN AUSCHWITZ**

*In the dim dungeon of Auschwitz, a flame was kindled to dispel the gloom...  
Their torn hearts were rekindled with hope and pride.*<sup>102</sup>

Ritual may be conceptualized as a fixed form of behaviour that differs from normal conduct, relating to particular times places, and generally possesses symbolic meaning for the performer.<sup>103</sup> Religious ritual tends to be performed within the framework of a belief in a mystical existence.<sup>104</sup> This chapter will look at the persistence of rituals deriving from and organized by the law, religion and tradition of Judaism in Auschwitz. These include individual and communal prayer, dietary laws, religious education. It will discuss the extent to which it was possible for inmates to observe the commandments; and how they did through by adapting the traditional rituals. Moreover, it will explore how female prisoners practiced Judaism by supporting each other, as traditionally they had not been part of the world of public prayer. This chapter will also deal with the celebration of Holy Days – like the *Sabbath* and *Yom Kippur* – inside Auschwitz, and the extra significance these acquired in the camp context. It will also examine the motivations Jewish inmates had to continue religious observance. Finally, it will assess the effects that religious practice could have on Auschwitz prisoners.

Jewish law (*halakhah*) consists of an elaborate set of routines that deal with all aspects of a Jew's life; their relationships and responsibilities to God and men. A Jew is judged to be "religious" largely on the basis of their observance of the *mitzvot* (commandments).<sup>105</sup> In Judaism, religious practice is paramount, with less attention being devoted to actual belief.<sup>106</sup> Jewish religious practice is also heavily gendered. Public religious utterance of the prophetic kind – including communal prayer, leading ceremonial services, and *halakhic* study and dispute – was traditionally considered the labour of men. The role of women concerned the physical and spiritual care of the home and family – including raising Jewish children and observing purity laws.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Pearl Benisch, *To Vanquish the Dragon* (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1991), 364-366.

<sup>103</sup> Jan Snoek, "Defining 'Rituals'," in *Theorizing Rituals, Volume I: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, eds. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg (Boston: Brill, 2006), xiii.

<sup>104</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 19.

<sup>105</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, "The Value of Religion," 89.

<sup>106</sup> Wasserstein, *On the Eve*, 144.

<sup>107</sup> Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2003), 23, 68-73.

Before the Holocaust, a fair share of Eastern European Jews, including half of Polish Jewry, closely adhered to religious traditions.<sup>108</sup> Male Orthodox Jews were required to lay *tefillin* (phylacteries) every weekday morning,<sup>109</sup> pray three times a day in a *minyan*,<sup>110</sup> celebrate the Sabbath and festivals, and obey the 613 commandments and prohibitions;<sup>111</sup> their everyday existence of Orthodox Jews was almost entirely defined by the *halakhah*. Even so-called “non-religious Jews” observed some of the *Sabbath* and the dietary laws.<sup>112</sup> Thus, for many Jews (especially the Eastern European), Judaism was an all-encompassing way of life; and the basis of their self-perception as individuals and as a community.<sup>113</sup>

In Auschwitz, however, traditionalist Jews whose whole way of life was shaped by the injunctions of Jewish law, were denied the possibility of observing God’s commandments.<sup>114</sup> All religious practices were forbidden; being caught participating in religious services, praying or in possession of any objects of religious cult almost always resulted in severe punishment or death.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, prisoners’ lives were structured to the last detail by an SS-imposed daily schedule.<sup>116</sup> For the overwhelming majority of Jewish prisoners there was little to no opportunity to perform the *mitzvot* during their incarceration.<sup>117</sup> Still, we know of many Jews who, through great efforts, did; albeit usually hurriedly and without the precision of their pre-incarceration observance.<sup>118</sup> Mihaly Templer, a Hungarian survivor, related: “Even in Auschwitz...we tried to observe there whatever we could. ...If a German soldier or a couple came, everything was hidden and everyone ran away.”<sup>119</sup> The need for discretion was paramount. As camp regulations did not allow religious practices to be publicized, they often went unnoticed by guards and even fellow inmates.<sup>120</sup> The virtual impossibility of quantifying how many inmates engaged in rituals means we cannot know the actual degree of religious observance in concentration and death camps. But we do know that in Auschwitz and elsewhere, thousands of Jews took part in such

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<sup>108</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982), 177.

<sup>109</sup> *Tefillin* or phylacteries are leather boxes containing scriptural passages worn by Jewish men during morning weekday prayers.

<sup>110</sup> A *minyan* is a quorum of ten adult Jewish men gathered for the purpose of public prayer.

<sup>111</sup> Wasserstein, *On the Eve*, 125.

<sup>112</sup> Bauer, *History*, 177.

<sup>113</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 90.

<sup>114</sup> Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of the European Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 533-534.

<sup>115</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 94.

<sup>116</sup> Gutman, “Auschwitz,” 10.

<sup>117</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 86.

<sup>118</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 94.

<sup>119</sup> Michaly Templer, Interview 45507 (*Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998), accessed 22/04/19.

<sup>120</sup> Landes, “Spiritual Responses,” 263.

“underground” observance – and we can fairly assume that those whose stories we know of represent those of many other ordinary Jews who clung on religious observance, despite grave danger.<sup>121</sup>

### **The Daily *Mitzvot***

Certain *mitzvot* require that the Jew perform a number of rituals every day. Prayer is one of special significance, as the Jewish tradition is one of prayer, and prayer is how God manifests himself in His Creation.<sup>122</sup> The persistence of prayer in Auschwitz has a prominent position within survivor testimony. Shlomo Venezia, a Greek Jew who worked in the *Sonderkommando*,<sup>123</sup> told of how upon first entering their barracks in Auschwitz in April 1944, “Several of the young boys started praying in a corner. They hadn’t been able to keep their books, but they knew the prayers by heart.”<sup>124</sup> For many, this commitment to prayer did not wane with time. As Benjamin Jacobs (born Berek Jakubowicz), a Polish Jew, recalled that after some time in the camp, “The undaunted believers still prayed every day. It amazed me how they still remembered word-for-word the various prayers of...the morning, afternoon and evening liturgies.”<sup>125</sup> Those who remembered the words would pray out loud for others to listen and respond “Amen”. Sometimes prayers and even complete prayer books would be written out by hand on odd pieces of paper or any material at hand.<sup>126</sup> Such impressive memories were a reflection of great mental resilience, as Miklos Nyiszli, a Jewish doctor and Auschwitz survivor, explained that in the camp, “the lack of vitamin D caused perpetual drowsiness and partial amnesia: often they [inmates] could no longer remember the names of the streets where they had once lived or their house numbers.”<sup>127</sup> Elie Wiesel spoke of how, when an inmate smuggled in a pair of *tefillin*, at least 200 Jews would wake up an hour earlier every day, and stand line to put on the *tefillin* for a few minutes, say a blessing or recite the first verse the morning prayer.<sup>128</sup> When they did not have access to phylacteries,

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<sup>121</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 51.

<sup>122</sup> The *halakah* dictates that the Jew should pray three times a day: in the morning (*Shacharit*), afternoon (*Minchah*), and evening (*Maariv*). The Jewish prayer book, called a *siddur*, contains the different prayers and outlines special services for certain occasions. See David Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness*, 91-94.

<sup>123</sup> *Sonderkommandos* refer to the groups of Jewish prisoners forced to perform a variety of duties in the gas chambers and crematoria of the Nazi death camps.

<sup>124</sup> Shlomo Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 44.

<sup>125</sup> Benjamin Jacobs, *The Dentist of Auschwitz: A Memoir* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 130.

<sup>126</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 4.

<sup>127</sup> Miklos Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eyewitness Account*, trans. Tibere Kremer and Richard Seaver (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1961), 114.

<sup>128</sup> Richard Rubenstein and Elie Wiesel, “An Exchange,” in *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, eds. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1989), 365.

inmates would mime the ritual of wrapping them around their arms and heads before prayer as tradition dictated.<sup>129</sup> Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Meisels from Hungary considered the resolve of these Jews to fulfil this “beloved *mitzvah*” miraculous in itself.<sup>130</sup>

Communal prayer also existed in Auschwitz, although always clandestinely. A *havurah* (“fellowship”) of religious Jews would meet daily for *tefillah bezibbur* (communal prayer).<sup>131</sup> Sinai Adler, a Czech Jew, recounted how the young men of his hut would all gather in one of the corners for public prayer every day.<sup>132</sup> Rabbinic Judaism taught that wherever there was a *minyan*, a sacred space was established and God’s divine presence (*Shekinah*) was summoned among them.<sup>133</sup> Prayer found expression even in the darkest places of Auschwitz – in the crematoria, the members of the *Sonderkommando* would recite *kaddish* (the Jewish traditional prayer for the dead) before burning the body of someone they recognized.<sup>134</sup> Filip Müller, who was brought to Auschwitz in April 1942 and forced to work in the *Sonderkommando*, witnessed how a crowd about to enter the gas chambers, began reciting the *kaddish*. Although the prayer is traditionally said by surviving relatives for a family member who has passed, since these people knew they would be no one left to say *kaddish* for them, they recited it for themselves while they were still alive.<sup>135</sup> Another prayer commonly recited by the doomed in their last moments before the gas chambers, was the *Shema* (“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!”). The reason for this choice traces back to the well-known story of Rabbi Akiva’s death as told in the Talmud – when the Romans were leading him to his execution, it became time to recite the morning *Shema*. While he was being tortured, he said the prayer; and he did so, simply because it was time for him to do so, and the assault by the Romans could not interfere with his Jewish way of life. It became customary that when a Jew’s life is threatened, or they feel the end is near, they would use their last moments on earth to recite the first verse of the *Shema*. Emulating Rabbi Akiva’s commitment to Jewish life, tens of thousands of Jews went into the gas chambers reciting the *Shema* or some other affirmation of faith.<sup>136</sup> As well as praying, inmates would also sing religious songs together. Jewish scriptures and liturgy contain many songs of hope and faith; these were well-known among the pre-Holocaust religious community – in fact,

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<sup>129</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 29.

<sup>130</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 7.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>132</sup> Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 34-35.

<sup>133</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 71.

<sup>134</sup> Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 107.

<sup>135</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 71.

<sup>136</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 73-74.

singing has been a part of Jewish life since ancient times.<sup>137</sup> Wiesel shared how in the evenings laying in their cots, he and the men in his bunk would sing Hasidic melodies.<sup>138</sup> However these songs were performed, they drew on memories and could momentarily numb the effects of the camp's inhumane conditions.<sup>139</sup>

Also central to the Jew's daily life are the *mitzvot* concerning dietary laws. The section of Jewish law that deals with what foods can and cannot be eaten, and how those foods must be prepared and eaten is called the *Kashrut*; *kosher* refers to the foods that meet these standards. The little food that prisoners were given by the Nazis was very often not *kosher*. For a while, the dietary laws of Judaism had raised many questions about proper conduct regarding food in the ghettos and camps – where hunger was extreme. These were usually decided on the basis of the overriding force of the biblical commandment to preserve one's life; the first words of Deuteronomy 4:9 emphasize the precedence given to the preservation and protection of life over other prescriptions. Thus, religious Jews who consumed food from the camp kitchen did so with the understanding that they were fulfilling the divine commandment of guarding their lives – indeed, when there is a possible danger to life due to inadequate food supplies, a Jew is permitted to eat whatever food is available.<sup>140</sup> In the context of the camp, where hunger reigned supreme, even pausing before eating the food that had been handed to say the *berakhah* (blessing said before eating), could require the utmost self-discipline.<sup>141</sup> Nonetheless, survivors have spoken of some who steadfastly adhered to the *Kashrut*. Müller referred to a man who “to avoid offending the strict Jewish dietary laws, ate almost nothing but bread, margarine and onions.”<sup>142</sup> An Auschwitz survivor interviewed by Berkovits spoke of another Jew who, in order to avoid breaking the strict Jewish dietary laws, “would eat only bread and water. Only seldom did he touch the warm food.”<sup>143</sup> The interviewee shared his perception of this man's observance and the level of sacrifice it entailed: “At first we thought he was mentally disturbed. In the course of the years, however, we learned to appreciate that this ‘madness’ was a manifestation of a strong personality and an exalted faith.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Eliyana Adler, “No Raisins, No Almonds: Singing as Spiritual Resistance to the Holocaust,” *Shofar* 24, no. 4 (2006): 55.

<sup>138</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 63.

<sup>139</sup> Adler, “No Raisins,” 66.

<sup>140</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 28-29.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>142</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 66.

<sup>143</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 3.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

Judaism has an age-old insistence upon learning as a vital part of man's mission on earth, and for centuries, Jews have cultivated the teaching of the youth as a major obligation of both the family and the community.<sup>145</sup> In the words of Wiesel, "learning is a part of Judaism and Judaism is learning. This is a commandment that all must follow."<sup>146</sup> He explains that the Torah does not only require the observance of the *mitzvot*, but also the study of them.<sup>147</sup> The devotion to the *mitzvah* of studying sacred texts by no means disappeared in Auschwitz. Even with no copies of the Talmud were available, some Jews would recite liturgy they knew by heart, reproducing an 'Oral Torah'. Often the best opportunity for this kind of teaching and learning was on the way to the place of work and back.<sup>148</sup> Many religious men reportedly studied the Talmud through recitation, analysed the passages from memory, improvised underground *yeshivot*,<sup>149</sup> or seminaries, and engaged in Talmudic dispute.<sup>150</sup> Italian writer Primo Levi related how in his barracks, two rabbis would spend long evenings discussing Talmudic questions in Yiddish and Hebrew.<sup>151</sup> Müller also recalled that Orthodox Jews would devote all their free time to praying for the dead and studying religious writings, often with books that had previously belonged to other pious Jews sent to the gas chambers.<sup>152</sup>

Teaching was no less important. Wiesel provides an example of how this concern persisted, even in Auschwitz. In a work commando, Wiesel, who had been a *Yeshiva Bocher* (student in a Talmudic academy), met a famous *Rosh Yeshiva* – the head of a notable *Yeshiva* Talmudic school in Galicia. The man urged the young Wiesel to continue his studies, despite not having any books. Wiesel related, "He used to recite a passage and I would repeat it, day after day. We studied Talmud to the very end. That a man like this not only studied but also taught Talmud in Auschwitz, that is a source of wonder to me."<sup>153</sup> Wiesel's amazement is fitting; his teacher and many others like him showed a remarkable sharpness of mind in their

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<sup>145</sup> Salo Baron, "European Jewry Before and After Hitler," in *The Nazi Holocaust: Historical Articles on the Destruction of the European Jews, vol. I: Perspectives on the Holocaust*, eds. Michael Marrus (London: Meckler, 1989), 31.

<sup>146</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 44.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>148</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 8.

<sup>149</sup> *Yeshiva* (pl. *yeshivot*) is a Jewish educational institution focusing on the study of traditional religious texts, like the Torah and the Talmud.

<sup>150</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 71.

<sup>151</sup> Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987), 76.

<sup>152</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 66.

<sup>153</sup> Rubenstein and Wiesel, "Exchange," 365.

pedagogic activities, for, in Auschwitz, inmates commonly revealed signs of mental deterioration, and lost their memory and ability to concentrate.<sup>154</sup>

### Female Prisoners

Women made up over 50% of the Jewish population that the Nazi regime deported and murdered in its concentration camp system.<sup>155</sup> Thus, to be comprehensive, any investigation into Jewish life during the Holocaust must pay attention to the experiences of women – religious practice is no exception. In the women's camp at Auschwitz, there were many instances of observant women trying to adapt the *mitzvot* to their new camp situation – much like the men, they smuggled prayer books, lit candles on the *Sabbath* from anything they could burn, or simulated making *matzot* at *Pesach* (Passover) virtually from air.<sup>156</sup> Naomi Winkler-Munkacsi, a Hungarian Jewess deported to Auschwitz in 1944, recalled how on *Tisha b'Av* (Jewish day of mourning), her friends in Auschwitz sat on the ground and read the Scroll of Lamentations in Yiddish from the *Tsena Urena* (prayer book for women), as was customary.<sup>157</sup>

Judaism commands the physical and spiritual care of the home and the family to women. This included the responsibility to pass on to their children, especially daughters, a sense of Jewishness.<sup>158</sup> However, Nazism had destroyed the Jewish home and torn apart the Jewish family. Women were also tasked with the observance of *mitzvot* regarding two areas of purity laws: menstruation and the preparation of *kosher* food. After menstruation, a ritual immersion in the sacred waters of the *mikvah* (bath) is meant to religiously purify and cleanse women.<sup>159</sup> While there was no *mikvah* in Auschwitz, many female survivors testified that they felt a need to keep as clean as possible in the camp, as futile as their attempts to do so might have been.<sup>160</sup> Considering a close alliance exists in Jewish tradition between cleanliness and divine presence, feminist theologian, Melissa Raphael posits that the fact that women often washed with ineffective cleaning agents (such as coffee, urine or sewer water) suggests that cleansing could have represented a gestural or ritual act.<sup>161</sup> This idea is supported by a statement made by Czech Jewess Livia Bitton-Jackson (born Elli Friedmann)

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<sup>154</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz* (London: Granada, 1972), 96.

<sup>155</sup> Joan Ringelheim, "Preface to the Study of Women and the Holocaust," *Contemporary Jewry* 17, no. 1 (1996): 2.

<sup>156</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 44.

<sup>157</sup> Naomi Winkler-Munkacsi, "Jewish Religious Observances in Women's Death Camps in Germany," *Yad Vashem Bulletin* 20 (1967): 36.

<sup>158</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 73.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>160</sup> Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 70.

<sup>161</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 68.

– during a brief respite from Auschwitz in 1944, a forced labour factory gave her the opportunity to shower, and she expressed her joy in religious language: “As we get out of the shower, a secret spark of self-esteem is nurtured deep within. It’s a divine image. A promise of redemption.”<sup>162</sup>

In any case, within Auschwitz, Jewish women could normally not properly carry out their practices of purity and food separation, and the Jewish home and family had ceased to exist. So how could women follow God’s commands inside the camp? Traditionally, women had never belonged to the worlds of communal prayer, *halakhic* study and dispute – these practices were entirely alien to them, and impossible to take up without any guidance available.<sup>163</sup> This was the result of a gendered division of religious labour – not of women being any less religious.

What women did do in the concentration camp, far more than men, was develop more extensive and more durable bonds among themselves. Virtually all women in Auschwitz formed surrogate families. Such groupings are not wholly unknown among men, but it has become clear that men did not usually form the mutually dependent, protective relationships commonly found among women.<sup>164</sup> An Austrian Jewess who arrived in Auschwitz at the start of 1943 and contracted typhus, shares about how she befriended a group of Jewish women from Berlin: “Without them, I wouldn’t have gotten through this illness. ... The women supported me physically, emotionally and spiritually.”<sup>165</sup>

This taking care of one another was based on the values of *hesed* (kindness) – a fundamental component of Jewish religious and cultural life.<sup>166</sup> Among both secular and religious Jews, biblical ethical precepts concerning love and kindness had fused social and religious values together, developing a strong Jewish sense of moral responsibility to the community.<sup>167</sup> Thus, observant Jewish life was permeated by the notion that the entire people of Israel bear responsibility for one another.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, the Talmud teaches that Judaism’s ultimate purpose is to elicit the presence of God, which is done first and foremost by

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<sup>162</sup> Livia Bitton-Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing up in the Holocaust* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 146.

<sup>163</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 72-73.

<sup>164</sup> Myrna Goldberg, “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Leonore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): 337.

<sup>165</sup> Joan Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” *Signs* 10, no. 4 (1985): 749.

<sup>166</sup> Judith Tydor Baumel, “Women’s Agency and Survival Strategies during the Holocaust,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 22 (1999): 336.

<sup>167</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 98.

<sup>168</sup> Judith Tydor Baumel, “Social Interaction among Jewish Women in Crisis during the Holocaust,” *Gender and History* 7 (1995): 78.

imitating God, by responding to those in need with love and empathy.<sup>169</sup> Raphael convincingly maintains that this Talmudic identification of God's activity with that of the carer is what drove so many women in Auschwitz to act compassionately and aid those who were even more broken than themselves, through these "camp sisterhoods".<sup>170</sup> Memoirs by female survivors give credence to the idea that the mutual assistance groups they formed were not wholly pragmatic but also, by their basis on ethical obligation, broadly Jewish.<sup>171</sup> Many of these memoirs cite biblical precepts like the Levitical injunction to love your neighbour as yourself (19:18), in regards to how they navigated camp life.<sup>172</sup>

An example of this religion-infused female bonding is the *Zehnerschaft* ("group of ten") camp sisters, founded upon the Orthodox values that enculturated young women into a Jewish ethic and educational community that encouraged them to regard each other as sisters.<sup>173</sup> These women did not limit their assistance to group members but for years, in Auschwitz and other camps, they endangered their own lives to help other women by sharing food and precious commodities, regardless of whether these other women were observant Jews.<sup>174</sup> They saw serving as serving God – as Rivka England, a member of the *Zehnerschaft* put it: "life in ... Auschwitz was a test of our willingness to "sanctify God" by adhering to our faith by assisting as many Jews as possible and by remaining decent human beings."<sup>175</sup>

### High Holy Days and Festivals

Of utmost importance for observant Jews is the keeping of the *Sabbath* – the day of rest and worship, as commanded by the Book of Exodus, celebrated from sundown on Friday until night has fallen on Saturday. Within Auschwitz, although prisoners were often aware when it was *Sabbath*, there was virtually no way to fully observe it, as the Nazis forced the prisoners to work through Saturday. Nevertheless, some inmates made every effort to work as little as possible or not at all on that day. Edith Kaufman, a Hungarian Jewess, explained that some people were very particular about not working on *Shabbat* – some girls in her work unit would work extra hard during the week and hid what they made under piles of rags, so that if

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<sup>169</sup> Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 242.

<sup>170</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 115.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> This group was formed in spring 1943 at the Plaszow labour camp in Poland. It consisted of women aged 16-26; all but one of the members had a common educational and religious background – that of Krakow's Beis Yaakov School for girls, founded by the Hasidic educational reformer, Sarah Schehierer. After Plaszow, the group was sustained at great risk through Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. See Baumel, "Social Interaction," 72-76.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Cited in Baumel, "Social Interaction," 79.

on *Shabbat* someone wanted to see what they had produced, they would show that which they had made during the week.<sup>176</sup> Fortunately, they were never caught at this, but it carried a tremendous risk.

Judaism has a number of other holidays which are observed by Jews throughout the Hebrew calendar year.<sup>177</sup> Holiday services were “conducted”, as best they could be, before dawn in barracks, in an abandoned shed to which inmates sneaked at great risk, or even on the march.<sup>178</sup> The celebration of Jewish festivals demanded the keeping of a ritual calendar. Yesha’yah Glick, who was a boy in Auschwitz, recounted how using the stub of a pencil, he wrote down the various dates in which the religious festivals and holy days into a prayer book; this calendar came to help all camp inmates who, whenever necessary, went to ask Glick when a certain festival or fast was to fall.<sup>179</sup>

Religious celebrations in Auschwitz varied widely in size and complexity, most often due to levels of risk and the availability of religious objects. In his renowned memoir, Wiesel recounts of an eve of *Rosh Hashanah* (Jewish New Year) in Auschwitz – ten thousand prisoners, coming from every block, attended the service, participated in the prayers, and even wished one another a Happy New Year.<sup>180</sup> Conversely, Menachem Rubin, a Romanian Jew, recalled a far more modest celebration at Birkenau: “During Hanukkah, there was one male in our barrack who somehow managed to light one candle for one second. ...we said Hanukkah, *Al HaNissim*, the great miracles, just ...the way we say it now.”<sup>181</sup> The scarcity of religious objects was sometimes countered by the use of imagination. On the night before Passover, a Hungarian girl, gathered the girls in her barracks and told them of her plan to carry out the *Seder*, even without any of the material ingredients needed for the celebration:

‘Tomorrow after midnight, we shall arrange our *Seder*, not altogether differently from the way it was done by the Marranos in Spain. True, there are neither *matzot*,<sup>182</sup> nor the Four Cups, nor anything else that would be normally required, but we shall use our imagination. Each of us will recall the *Seder* as it was celebrated at home. As I read the *Haggadah* from my

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<sup>176</sup> Edith Kaufman, Interview 26900 (*Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, 1997), accessed 22/04/19.

<sup>177</sup> The term ‘High Holy Days’ collectively refers to *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Other holidays, like Passover (*Pesach*) are considered Jewish ‘festivals’.

<sup>178</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 95.

<sup>179</sup> Cited in Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 34.

<sup>180</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 84-86.

<sup>181</sup> Menachem Rubin, Interview 30923 (*Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, 1997), accessed 22/04/19.

<sup>182</sup> *Matzot* is an unleavened flatbread that is part of Jewish cuisine and forms an integral element of the Passover festival.

*siddur*, we shall remember the holy observance as it used to be. Each one of you will individually light and bless the holy day candles in her heart. When I read the blessings over the wine, as prescribed in the *Haggadah*, you will lick your lips and say “Amen”. And so they did on *Pessah* night.<sup>183</sup>

Despite the adverse conditions, or maybe because of them, one of the surviving participants of that humble celebration affirmed it was the only *Seder* night whose memory will forever remain fresh in her mind.<sup>184</sup>

Sometimes prayers were the only means available for ritual celebration. Polish survivor of Auschwitz, Samuel Pisar, related how Jews continued to say their prayers during the High Holy Days: “In the darkness, with prison caps for yarmulkes, every man stood in front of his bunk, facing Jerusalem. Without the chants of a cantor to guide him, every man mumbled softly, lest we be heard by the roaming guards and their vicious dogs, whatever prayers he could remember.”<sup>185</sup>

Several survivors have told of how the celebration of festivities was adapted within the camp setting. The Passover *Seder* organized in the children’s block 31 of the family camp at Birkenau in April 1944 is such an example. While the children were not familiar with the ceremony’s rules, the staff improvised to suffuse the event with an aura of tradition. The children were told the story of Exodus, of the crossing of the Red Sea, and of leaving behind bondage for freedom. Ota Kraus, a Czech Jewish prisoner, taught the children The Four Questions (a traditional song of the Passover *Seder*), which they sung enthusiastically.<sup>186</sup> Recalling that night, Kraus later wrote in his diary: “They did not observe all the rules of the ceremony as prescribed by the traditions. ...But despite everything, even though they lived in a world of fantasy, it was an original Passover *Seder*. As long as they believed in miracles, not everything had yet been lost.”<sup>187</sup>

In the end, if at times Jewish holidays could not be celebrated, at least they could be affirmed and recognised. On the day of the festival rejoicing Jewish Law, a group of fifty *yeshiva* students stood at the door of the gas chambers and exclaimed: “It is *Simhat Torah* today. There are no scrolls of the Torah here; but surely God is here. Let us celebrate with Him.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 19.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Samuel Pisar, *Of Blood and Hope* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 61.

<sup>186</sup> Nili Keren, “The Family Camp,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1994), 436.

<sup>187</sup> Cited in Keren, “Family Camp,” 436-437.

<sup>188</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 74.

Holy Days could acquire greater significance within Auschwitz when their symbolic meaning reflected the inmates' present reality. For example, survivors have noted that in attempting to obtain the customary symbolic foods for the Passover *Seder*,<sup>189</sup> they felt no need to eat the bitter herbs which traditionally represented the bitterness experienced in bondage, for they had their own experience of bitter servitude.<sup>190</sup> Likewise, a religious Hasid spoke of praying during Rosh Hashanah, where inmates did not need to imagine a Day of Judgement:

We clearly knew and felt that "behold this was the Day of Judgement for the entire world" – how much more so for us swallowed alive in the belly of the lion. Our lives dangled by a single hair. ...We, therefore, should have cried out, for all forms of weeping pressed on our hearts. ...I did not detect even a single trace of a tear shed by anyone. ...We recited the verses "all mankind passes before thee like a flock of sheep. ...On Rosh Hashanah their destiny is inscribed...who shall live and who shall die."...To our sorrow we saw these verses fulfilled. After only an hour...came the destruction known as the Selection. It did its work. The verses were fulfilled for us in the full sense of their meaning.<sup>191</sup>

Traditionally, under normal circumstances, tears and sobs accompany the religious Jew's recitation of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy – while often *pro forma*, these gestures are meant to evoke genuine feelings of fear for the future. The service means to confront the worshipper with the fragility of his own existence, and the realization that his life may be renewed in the New Year, or tragically ended. In Auschwitz, however, there was an absence of tears during the Rosh Hashanah service – these Jews had already witnessed first-hand the fragility of their own lives, and their innermost fears had already been realized with the destruction of everything they knew and loved. As religious Jews in Auschwitz, they did not need symbolic or emotional inducements to contemplate a judgement that lay before them; they understood themselves to be within an exacting judgement already.<sup>192</sup>

The desire to observe religious practices at times meant the self-denial of essential resources – especially since many Jewish holidays are celebrated by fasting, and in the camps bread meant life and survival.<sup>193</sup> Wiesel related how the question of whether to fast on Yom

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<sup>189</sup> The Passover *Seder* is a Jewish ritual feast which marks the beginning of the holiday of Passover.

<sup>190</sup> Landes, "Spiritual Responses," 269.

<sup>191</sup> Cited in Landes, "Spiritual Responses," 269-270.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 266-267.

Kippur was hotly debated in Auschwitz, because “to fast would mean a surer, swifter death. We fasted here the whole year round. The whole year was Yom Kippur.”<sup>194</sup> Nonetheless, many Jews seem to have fasted. This was the case of the Romanian Jewess Ruth Brand and her cousin Chaia, who fasted in Birkenau during Yom Kippur of 1944. They decided to do so as they worked near the crematorium, digging through the ashes of murdered Jews and, according to Brand, “it was a simple decision.”<sup>195</sup> According to psychoanalyst Paul Marcus and Professor of Philosophy Alan Rosenberg, examples of self-denial within the camp context, arising out of devotion to the *halakah* should be understood as acts of assertiveness and vitality. Such actions infused the prisoners’ struggle to survive with a “higher” meaning.<sup>196</sup>

### Ritual Objects

Within the Auschwitz universe, the acquisition and preservation of religious objects was considered a “sacred task”.<sup>197</sup> Stripped of all their possessions upon arrival –including prayer books, *Seder* plates and Sabbath candles – prisoners risked their lives to obtain substitutes, often by rummaging the belongings of those sent to the gas chambers upon arrival. Prayer books, phylacteries, *Shofars*, and candles were hidden. The possession of ritual objects served to preserve the sense of an inner self and Jewish identity in a place designed to erase it.<sup>198</sup>

Survivor testimony has often conveyed the spiritual value that such cult objects acquired within the concentration camp. Mihaly Templer remembered how a Slovakian prisoner had phylacteries, and “there were lines of maybe thousands of people who put on the *tefillin*... just for a few minutes.”<sup>199</sup> When a Hungarian girl succeeded in smuggling a *siddur* into the camp, it was treasured and protected by all the girls in the barracks against any danger of discovery.<sup>200</sup> Zalman Kleinman, a Jew from Carpathian Ruthenia, gave another example that reflected the significance of religious objects in the camp setting; as Kleinman was lying in his bunk in the children’s barracks at Auschwitz, he saw a German officer beat another boy with a rubber truncheon. After receiving over fifty lashes all over his body, the fourteen year-old boy still did not cry. Once the officer had left, the victim was lifted off the floor and asked the reason for his punishment, to which he responded: “It was well

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<sup>194</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 87.

<sup>195</sup> Ruth Brand, Interview 36328 (*Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, 1997), accessed 22/04/19.

<sup>196</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 98.

<sup>197</sup> Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 42.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> Templer, Interview 45507.

<sup>200</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 18.

worthwhile. I brought several prayer books to my friends.”<sup>201</sup> Müller also described the moment when a *kapo* (prisoner-functionary) named Fischl managed to obtain a prayer book in Hebrew and a set of *tefillin*, and he “appeared to be the most satisfied... the Lord Adonai had hearkened to him.”<sup>202</sup> In the very acquisition of ritual objects that enabled their prayer, believers saw the miracles of the Creator, and found themselves being grateful to Him.<sup>203</sup>

As it has already been mentioned, often inmates did not have access to these ritual objects, and many demonstrated great resourcefulness and creativity by improvising them. In particular, major efforts were made to fashion candles and use them in ritual celebrations. Edith Kaufman explained how on *Hanukkah*, she and other Jewish women collected their margarine rations and threads from the rags they were working with and fashioned wicks out of that. They somehow found matches, and they melted the margarine in their spoons to light the improvised candles.<sup>204</sup> Similarly, Polish survivor Yossel Rosensaft testified that in December 1944, he and a group of fellow inmates had found a piece of wood on the snow, with their spoons they carved out eight holes and put pieces of carton in them. They then lit these and sang a Hanukkah song around it.<sup>205</sup> Naomi Winkler-Munkacsi provided examples of women attempting to create candles for the Sabbath. On a Sabbath eve in November 1944, after a twelve-hour work shift, a woman said to her: “I just lit the Sabbath candles. I saw two electric bulbs and said the blessing on them.”<sup>206</sup> In another instance, Winkler-Munkacsi saw a woman take some iron rings from her work place, and arrange them as if they were candles and candlesticks; then she silently recited the blessing over the kindling of the Sabbath candles.<sup>207</sup> In this way, inmates physically observed rituals through these imagined, but no less real, ritual objects. The non-existent candles manifested themselves in the tools and objects which were available – within the camp setting, prisoners transformed these ordinary items into sacred objects of ritual observance through their imagination, and by attending to them as though they were holy.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 35.

<sup>203</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 7.

<sup>204</sup> Kaufman, Interview 26900.

<sup>205</sup> Yehuda Bauer, “Forms of Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust,” in *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, eds. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1989), 152.

<sup>206</sup> Winkler-Munkacsi, “Jewish Religious Observances,” 36.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 46.

## Motivations for Religious Practice

Survivor testimony indicates that prisoners in Auschwitz practiced Judaism for a myriad of different reasons. The following section will consider faith, a struggle for self-preservation, and a desire to resist the Nazis as drivers for religious observance.

### *Faith*

Naturally, many were driven to observe rituals by their deep-rooted faith and religiosity – in the words of an eleventh-century rabbi, “devotion to prayer is nothing but the soul’s longing for God.”<sup>209</sup> In accordance to the teachings of Judaism, the life-long devotion to religious practice of many Jews was rooted in the conviction that to love God, one had to serve him through the understanding of the Torah and sanctify one’s life by meticulously following his law.<sup>210</sup> They understood the everyday commitment to living a *halakhic* life to be a divine ordainment; which, if fulfilled with total love and devotion, would attain them God’s blessing in this and the next world.<sup>211</sup> Following this logic, in Auschwitz, surrounded by an omnipresent lethal threat, ritual observance was all the more urgent. Testimonies reveal an intense desire from individuals to prove themselves to God. Wiesel recalls how in the discussion of whether or not to fast on *Yom Kippur*, a number of men said, “we should fast simply because it was dangerous to do so. We should show God that even here, in this enclosed hell, we were capable of singing His praises.”<sup>212</sup> Ruth Brand demonstrated the same resoluteness in the exchange she had with girls questioning her decision to fast and she replied, “Well, today is *Yom Kippur*, and I’m fasting.” When they protested that clearly God did not want them to fast, or else he would have given them much better conditions, Ruth countered, “Maybe He wants to see that *davka* (precisely) in spite of this, we are still going to fast. So we are fasting.”<sup>213</sup>

The notion of Jewish women’s sisterhood too was grounded in explicitly religious ethical thought and practice.<sup>214</sup> Through relationships of care and dependency, women maintained their own religious modes in Auschwitz, which, unlike the sacred written tradition, had long been normative for themselves. Their religiosity had more to do with love

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<sup>209</sup> Bachya ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, vol. II, trans. Moses Hyamson (New York: Feldheim, 1970), 211.

<sup>210</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “Holocaust Survivor’s Faith,” 130.

<sup>211</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 90.

<sup>212</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 87.

<sup>213</sup> Brand, Interview 36328.

<sup>214</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 98.

and human relations than with abstract theological concepts, a fact which is blatantly evidenced in their post-Holocaust testimony.<sup>215</sup>

This is not to say that the faithful observant inmates approved of the monstrosity around them because God seemingly tolerated it. Their faith in God, however, commanded them to stand firm in the face of the irreconcilable. This meant continuing to observe the commandments, pray, celebrate festivals and live as the bearer of God's image – despite everything, the authentic Jew perceived himself part of a centuries-old covenant between God and the people of Israel. Deriving the very essence of his being from this relationship, the Jew was resolute to maintain it, even when he did not understand the ways of his covenant partner.<sup>216</sup>

### *Self-preservation*

On the other hand, anthropologists like Terence Turner have observed that ritual observance can precede or exist independently of institutional religious belief.<sup>217</sup> Indeed, many testimonies point to the fact that ritual observances were often not motivated primarily by faith, but by a drive for survival.<sup>218</sup> A clear example of this is Shalom Farkash, a Ukrainian Jew from a Hasidic family, who candidly stated: “During the Holocaust, I divested from faith. I simply didn't think about it.”<sup>219</sup> But ritual observance remained an urgent concern for Farkash; he recalled that he and fellow inmates gave up their meal time to pray during Rosh Hashanah, as they were not allowed time off work to do so.<sup>220</sup> In the camps, ritual could outlast the collapse of faith – in cases like that of Farkash, ritual did not constitute an act of kneeling to God, but rather an expression of identity.<sup>221</sup> This notion resonates with a statement made by Baruch Marzel in an interview: “A lot of people ask me: ‘How could you keep observing the commandments in the camps, and afterwards?’ But for me, Judaism is a part of myself. It's in the blood that flows through my veins.”<sup>222</sup> His words suggest ritual as being wholly engraved in one's consciousness, to the point that it becomes an integral part of

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<sup>215</sup> Susan Starr Sered, ““She Perceives Her Work to be Rewarding”: Jewish Women in a Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, eds. Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 174-175.

<sup>216</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 124-125.

<sup>217</sup> Terence Turner, “Structure, Process, Form,” in *Theorizing Rituals, vol. I: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, eds. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, Michael Stausberg (Boston: Brill, 2016), 209.

<sup>218</sup> Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 26.

<sup>219</sup> Cited in Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 26.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>222</sup> Cited in Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 28.

a person.<sup>223</sup> Some, in fact, prayed despite themselves; memoirs speak of prayers appearing innately within those who refused them. When Wiesel heard a group of inmates reciting the *kaddish*, he saw no reason to bless God's name; but, he remembers, "in spite of myself, the words formed themselves and issued in a whisper from my lips."<sup>224</sup>

Numerous anthropologists have stressed the centrality of the performative aspect of the ritual – that is, a need for the ritual act itself.<sup>225</sup> For these Jews, rituals offered the possibility of expressing Jewish cultural identity, as well as their personal self-identity. In this sense, ritual served as an integral tool in efforts towards self-preservation.<sup>226</sup> In the same way that in Auschwitz, Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl engaged in the psychoanalytic examination of his fellow inmates,<sup>227</sup> and Primo Levi recited Dante to himself,<sup>228</sup> Jews observed rituals to re-establish a link to their past and reinforce their identity pre-traumatic. Whether conscious of it or not, many inmates took part in ritual observance as a way of survival; an attempt to break with the crushing reality of the camp.<sup>229</sup>

### *Spiritual resistance*

During the November 1938 pogrom, the Nazis burned thousands of copies of the Hebrew Bible and Torah scrolls in hundreds of communities across the Reich.<sup>230</sup> Auschwitz survivor Judith Dribben recalled a Nazi declaring upon the burning of a synagogue, "The Jewish God is burnt to ashes."<sup>231</sup> From that moment followed a foul campaign to defile not only the Jewish body, but Jewishness itself. Auschwitz not only prohibited all which Judaism considered holy, it also desecrated it.<sup>232</sup> The Germans chose Jewish holy days to be particularly murderous – commonly gassing prisoners deemed incurably ill on the *Sabbath* and other Jewish festivals.<sup>233</sup> Female prisoners were given pieces of *talles* (prayer shawl) to hold on their ill-fitting shoes or to wear as underpants.<sup>234</sup> Effectively, Jewish symbols of

<sup>223</sup> Rachmani, "Liminality Rituals," 7.

<sup>224</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 43.

<sup>225</sup> See Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>226</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 89.

<sup>227</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 102-103.

<sup>228</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 139.

<sup>229</sup> Rachmani, "Liminality Rituals," 2.

<sup>230</sup> Alon Confino, "Why did the Nazis Burn the Hebrew Bible? Nazi Germany, Representations of the Past, and the Holocaust," *The Journal of Modern History* 84, no. 2 (2012): 370.

<sup>231</sup> Judith Dribben, *And Some Shall Live* (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 1969), 24.

<sup>232</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 67.

<sup>233</sup> Irena Strzelecka, "Hospitals," in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1994), 381.

<sup>234</sup> Lidia Rosenfeld Vago, "One Year in the Black Hole of Our Planet Earth: A Personal Narrative," in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Leonore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 281.

holiness were left to be trampled into the mud or defecated on by those with uncontrollable diarrhoea.<sup>235</sup>

From early on, Jews understood Judaism to be under attack. Rabbi Shimon Huberband wrote from the Warsaw ghetto: “The intention behind cutting the beards was to target the religious faith of the pious Jews; just like burning down synagogues, tearing and destroying Torah scrolls, and destroying cemeteries.”<sup>236</sup> Mihaly Templer felt sure that the Germans were well-aware of the Jewish holy days because, in Auschwitz, the three major *Selektions*, were carried out on *Rosh Hashanah*, *Erev Yom Kippur*, and on *Simchat Torah*: “They knew very well, those days were always the worst, that’s when they really wanted us to suffer.”<sup>237</sup> Even Wiesel, who experienced Auschwitz as a young boy, recalls: “At the time, it seemed to me that the enemy’s aim was to attack God Himself in order to drive Him from His celestial throne.”<sup>238</sup> These and countless other testimonies reflect how the Jews instinctively perceived the nature of the confrontation between Nazism and the Jewish people – they saw the Germans as *Kohot haTumah* (‘forces of impurity’), bent on eliminating the very form of life that Jews represented, and destroying the supreme values of human existence which Judaism espoused.<sup>239</sup>

Throughout the Holocaust, Jewish communities reacted to this assault on their religion with an intense desire of preserving a life of Jewish quality as best they could, even in the deadliest of circumstances. This commitment to a Jewish life, as each one understood it, was based on the concept of *Kiddush ha-hayyim* (‘Sanctification of Life’).<sup>240</sup> It reflects a general feeling among Jews that their continued existence constituted a victory over the enemy who sought their extinction.<sup>241</sup> In this context, the continuation of ritual observance in the camps served as an affirmation both of one’s personal autonomy and the significance of the Jewish community. Canadian historian Michael Marrus argues that the resolve and commitment of some inmates to keep ritual observations under the Nazis is most likely rooted in this desire to “survive in dignity”.<sup>242</sup> Certain scholars place such actions under the umbrella of ‘spiritual resistance’, since they confronted the German strategy of demoralizing

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<sup>235</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 67.

<sup>236</sup> Rabbi Shimon Huberband cited in Kerenji, *Jewish Responses*, 447-448.

<sup>237</sup> Templer, Interview 45507.

<sup>238</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 183.

<sup>239</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 84-95.

<sup>240</sup> The term is attributed to Rabbi Yitshak Nissenbaum of the Warsaw ghetto.

<sup>241</sup> Shaul Esh, “The Dignity of the Destroyed: Towards a Definition of the Period of the Holocaust,” in *The Catastrophe of the European Jewry*, eds. Israel Gutman and Livia Rotkirchen (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1976), 356.

<sup>242</sup> Michael Marrus, “Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 1 (1995): 95.

the Jewish community by destroying their faith, and it represents a refusal to succumb to the assault on religious identity.<sup>243</sup> Performing ritual under mortal threat can be seen as a way of defying the surrounding order of destruction and eradication. According to Israeli researcher on the Holocaust and trauma, Moriya Rachmani, the observance of *Yom Kippur* in the camp exemplified this phenomenon – the act of fasting, which paradoxically carried a deadly risk, let the inmates resist the camp’s ‘order of death’. Thus, fasting was not a passive act, but rather an active effort to assert one’s life and identity.<sup>244</sup>

The language of survivors indeed suggests that amid their efforts at self-preservation, at times through ritual observance, they harboured a sense that “if a man dies without surrender, if one thing within him remains unbroken to the end, then the power which destroyed him has not, after all, crushed everything.”<sup>245</sup> This sense of holding on to one’s humanity to resist Nazism is clearly expressed in a statement by Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi: “Precisely because the *Lager* was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts.”<sup>246</sup> Moreover, Templer recounted the effort made by a group of Jews to celebrate *Hanukkah*, as German guards tried to prevent them from doing so – a rabbi tried to light candle from oil they had acquired at work, but German officers were roaming the barracks until very late at night to ensure that nobody was lighting *Hanukkah* candles. Only when they went to sleep, after eleven o’clock, could the group light the oil as a *Hanukkah* candle.<sup>247</sup>

It is very possible that their primary motivation to observe the festival was religious faith or a craving to reconnect with their pre-traumatic identities – nevertheless, it is clear that a sense of going against the wishes of Nazi officers became a significant aspect of the ritual, even when it made observance harder (by requiring them to stay up until later). Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, a Polish Jew, related of another such incident she witnessed in Birkenau; on *Yom Kippur*, Josef Mengele ordered a group of a hundred or so rabbis to dance next to the crematoria. They began chanting *Kol Nidre*,<sup>248</sup> effectively transforming the dance into prayer, and Mengele’s mockery into their devotion. Nomberg-Przytyk realized that, “Now they were

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<sup>243</sup> James Glass, *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Moral Uses of Violence and Will* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 105. See also Yehuda Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); Roger Gottlieb, “The Concept of Resistance: Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust,” *Social Theory and Practice* 9 (1983).

<sup>244</sup> Rachmani, “Liminality Rituals,” 18.

<sup>245</sup> Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 65.

<sup>246</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 44.

<sup>247</sup> Templer, Interview 45507.

<sup>248</sup> *Kol Nidre* is an Arameic declaration traditionally recited in the synagogue before the beginning of the evening service on *Yom Kippur*.

no longer singing in obedience to Mengele's orders."<sup>249</sup> These testimonies make clear that many inmates saw ritual observance (either their own or that of others), as an opportunity to counter the orders and designs of the Nazis ruling over them.

Testimonies make it evident that not all those who observed the *mitzvot* in Auschwitz were religious Jews. Regardless, on the threshold of death, many demonstrated. They did so to assert a number of principles: that despite the Nazi assault, they were still human, and that Jewish tradition and values were still meaningful. In other words, they sought to assert their humanity, in a Jewish way.<sup>250</sup> They maintained ritual observance as part of an effort, not only to survive, but to survive as Jews, and as human beings.

### **The Impact of Ritual Observance**

Camp conditions pushed the individual Jewish Auschwitz inmate to the extreme by swamping all habitual modes of activity that gave them a feeling of ontological security in the world.<sup>251</sup> Testimonies indicate that, in these circumstances, religious observance had a powerful effect on many. Müller's memoir implies this value when he relates his feelings upon finding his father among the dead in the crematoria:

I had come to believe that there were no human feelings left inside me. But while my team-mate recited the *kaddish* my soul mourned in pain and grief. As the flames busily devoured the mortal remains of my father, the words of the traditional prayer gave me solace in this hour of sorrow.<sup>252</sup>

In studying the extreme situation of concentration and death camps, Rachmani expands the traditional anthropological concept of liminality to include modes of consciousness present among inmates.<sup>253</sup> Reality in the camps can be seen as a perpetual liminal existence, given that inmates were forever hanging between their former, normal lives and death, in a very concrete sense. Moreover, the constant uncertainty of the end that characterised camp existence constitutes an extreme form of liminality. This limbo state

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<sup>249</sup> Sarah Nomborg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, trans. Roslyn Hirsch (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 106.

<sup>250</sup> Bauer, "Forms of Jewish Resistance," 152.

<sup>251</sup> Routines are vital to the psychological mechanisms sustaining a sense of trust and ontological security, by fostering self-esteem, self-continuity, and self-cohesion. When long-held routines are drastically shattered like they were in concentration camps, the individual finds himself in an overwhelming, disorganized situation. See Marcus and Rosenberg, "The Value of Religion," 91.

<sup>252</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 48.

<sup>253</sup> British anthropologist Victor Turner defined liminality in the context of rituals as a definitive stage within a rite of passage in which the individual is divested of his or her identity, social status and previous standing while not yet having gained a new status. Conventional anthropology applies this concept to the social structures it studies. See Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

between life and death was a tool of repression, erasure and annihilation.<sup>254</sup> The following paragraphs explore how ritual performance possibly countered this attack by acting as a means of self-preservation, and a way for inmates to break, albeit only momentarily, from their liminal situation.<sup>255</sup>

A key part of survival in the harsh conditions of Auschwitz was the preservation of identity. Rachmani holds that ritual contributed to this end by facilitating a perception of time and body that resisted their negation.<sup>256</sup> Studies have described the process of disintegration of identity in concentration camps,<sup>257</sup> by the painful split between one's identity prior to and during the traumatic event.<sup>258</sup> Religious observance had been, for many if not most prisoners, a deep-rooted part of their pre-Auschwitz lives and identities. The daily observance of *mitzvot* was practiced from a young age, and the celebration of the *Sabbath* was an integral part of family life among traditional Jewry.<sup>259</sup> This was so strongly the case that when the young Elie Wiesel, who came from a religious home, nibbled on a crust of bread on *Yom Kippur*, he described: "In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void."<sup>260</sup>

Performing rituals recalled familiar acts from the past, even when if inmate felt disconnected from theirs, thus helping them to maintain their pre-traumatic identity.<sup>261</sup> Several testimonies describe how religious practice took them back to their childhood, families, and homes. Hungarian Jewess, Judith Isaacson recalls the feelings that the Sabbath prayers evoked in her: "the introductory song was familiar to me from childhood. Recalling Friday night services with O'papa Klein, I wiped a tear."<sup>262</sup> Like prayers, ritual objects themselves could produce similar effect. Sarah Steller, who survived Auschwitz as a young girl, told of how finding a prayer book and reading from it in Birkenau brought back memories:

One day I found a prayer book in a pile. ...I looked through it carefully and the Hebrew letters flashed before my eyes. Letters I was familiar with. Prayers I had forgotten. Memories of my childhood that had completely

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<sup>254</sup> Rachmani, "Liminality Rituals," 12.

<sup>255</sup> Rachmani, "Ritual Existence," 25.

<sup>256</sup> Rachmani, "Liminality Rituals," 13.

<sup>257</sup> See Edith Jacobson, *The Self and the Object World* (London: Hogarth, 1964) for a study of trauma based on clinical research of political prisoners incarcerated by the Nazis.

<sup>258</sup> Richard Ulman and Doris Brothers, *The Shattered Self: A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma* (New Jersey: Analytic Press, 1993), 53.

<sup>259</sup> Zalman F. Ury, "Impressions of Religious Life of the Shtetl before World War II," in *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*, eds. Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes (Los Angeles: The Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1983), 47.

<sup>260</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 87.

<sup>261</sup> Rachmani, "Liminality Rituals," 8.

<sup>262</sup> Judith Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 81.

wiped out during my first days at Birkenau returned to me a little that night. ...I didn't want to give it up. I hid it in my dress. ...We prayed from the prayer book every day, all the girls who were with me in the work detail, all of whom had once known the prayer. ...I had it for some days, days in which it passed from hand to hand, reminding us somewhat of our lives before the train had brought us here.<sup>263</sup>

The forgotten prayer embodied a forgotten identity, a previous life, which Steller could now access thanks to the prayer book. Rachmani interprets the young girl's effort to keep the *siddur* so close to her body as a desire to connect her pre-traumatic and traumatic selves to each other.<sup>264</sup> The research of Argentinian psychoanalyst Yolanda Gampel indicates that for children in particular, cult items (including songs and prayers), could serve as transitional objects reconnecting them with an image of security within an unfamiliar, threatening environment during the Holocaust.<sup>265</sup>

Austrian psychologist Bruno Bettelheim suggested that in the camp context, the preservation of the capacity for emotional response, that is, the ability to feel, helped to preserve humanity and advanced the chances of survival.<sup>266</sup> In the camps, where inmates were constantly at risk of sliding into apathy, rituals could stimulate emotional responses by their symbolism and their recollection of the past.<sup>267</sup> The activation of basic human feelings resulting from religious practice is expressed in many testimonies. Zalman Gradowski, who came from an Orthodox home in Poland and was forced to work in the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*, related in his diary how he felt upon seeing a *minyanim* of Jews praying on the *Sabbath*: "I used to take a spark and run...and with its warmth to melt my frozen heart. ...My heart expired in tears. I was glad I had a *Sabbath* full of tears...because now I felt and sensed it for the first time."<sup>268</sup> Gradowski does not even directly participate in the ritual, yet the influence it exerts in arousing emotions within him is clear. The 'melting heart' metaphor conveys his return to feeling, and his return to his self.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Rachmani, "Ritual Existence," 43.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>265</sup> According to Gampel, such objects remind children of the uses they had served in their former lives, thus putting them back into contact with their families and pre-traumatic lives. See Yolanda Gampel, *Esos Padres Que Viven A Través De Mi: La Violencia de Estado y sus Secuelas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2006).

<sup>266</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 214.

<sup>267</sup> Ursula Rao, "Ritual in Society," in *Theorizing Rituals, Volume I: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, eds. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg (Boston: Brill, 2006), 146.

<sup>268</sup> Cited in Rachmani, "Liminality Rituals," 11.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

Time is a key element of the self – the sense of continuity, of being the same person, of the “I” across one’s life, constitutes one of the most elementary principles of the consciousness of selfhood.<sup>270</sup> The loss of temporal indicators (a deliberate feature of camp life) induced in the prisoners a feeling of having ‘lost’ their past, breaking down the continuity between past and present, and thus dissolving one’s consciousness of their identity.<sup>271</sup> Bertha Fohn, a Hungarian Jewess, recalled of her life in Auschwitz: “We lived like animals, without dates...we lost direction.”<sup>272</sup> In this context, the effort to perform rituals and keep track and observe the holidays, served as a way of preserving the sequence of linear time and a sense of order.<sup>273</sup> Hungarian religious women testified that they ordered events in Auschwitz based on the remembrance of Hebrew dates and seasons.<sup>274</sup>

In Auschwitz, the inmate was also deprived of bodily autonomy. Many testimonies describe camp prisoners as automatons. Gradowski related his reaction upon being appointed to the *Sonderkommando*: “They order us how to behave...Remember you have to become an automaton and move according to our will...in this place there are no walking peoples, only machines.”<sup>275</sup> All SS-ordered activities sought this effect. Ritual practice broke the mould of automation – it could create, in some cases, another form of bodily existence that, despite the desecration and debasement, remained of one’s past and identity. Ritual was one of the only ‘voluntary’ bodily actions available to the inmate in Auschwitz. The very use of the body for something other than forced labour or brutalization, allowed inmates to regain some control over their selves, and consequently strengthened their sense of identity.<sup>276</sup>

Rituals allowed inmates, for the isolated moments deviating from the forced order, to break with the concentration camp and create an alternative reality to it. Conducting a ritual entails performing a symbolic action that receives its significance from a foundational mythical narrative.<sup>277</sup> According to Romanian historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, as ritual mimics this mythical structure, when imitating it, the person observing the ritual connects to said structure and suspends their current situation. In that sense, for inmates, ritual enabled

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<sup>270</sup> Katarzyna Prot, “Broken Identity: The Impact of the Holocaust on Identity in Romanian and Polish Jews,” *Israel Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 45, no. 4 (2008): 240-241.

<sup>271</sup> Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 33.

<sup>272</sup> Cited in Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 33.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>274</sup> Rachmani, “Liminality Rituals,” 14.

<sup>275</sup> Cited in Rachmani, “Liminality Rituals,” 15.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

the camp order to be suspended – although the suffering of reality did not disappear, when performing rituals, prisoners were able to momentarily detach themselves from it.<sup>278</sup>

Moreover, ritual performance in the camps could recreate a sense of community. These religious communities came about either because religious inmates would deliberately seek out like-minded Jews, or because the observance of many rituals was done so collectively, or demanded the cooperation of more people.<sup>279</sup> Young Jews from practically everywhere in Europe would assemble in a corner of the youth barracks for daily services. One of the participants shared: “Praying ‘in community’ and the keeping of *mitzvot* brought us near to each other, though by origin and background we differed widely.”<sup>280</sup> In barracks made up of Polish and Greek Jews who did not share a common language, when Ya’akov Habib from Salonica began chanting a penitential prayer recited the week preceding *Rosh Hashana* in a distinctive Greek style, the entire barracks broke into cries due to the shared emotions which the prayer evoked.<sup>281</sup> The *mitzvah*-based community itself had intrinsic spiritual value for traditional Jews – it was a way of maintaining and expressing one’s deeply internalized values, preserving one’s pre-Holocaust sense of self, which, in turn, reconstituted the inmate’s ontological security.<sup>282</sup>

Various reports of observance by one person reawakening in fellow inmates the momentary experience of being alive and hopeful highlight the power of the effect that rituals had on inmates.<sup>283</sup> We encounter this phenomenon in Müller’s reaction to Fischl praying: “To me it seemed sheer madness to pray in Auschwitz, and absurd to believe in God in this place. In any other situation and in any other place I should not have taken Fischl seriously. But here, on the border-line between life and death... we felt strengthened by his faith.”<sup>284</sup> According to David Patterson, Müller’s story is an example of how a man robbed of his identity, regains the memory of himself as a human being through an ‘other’ (in this case, Fischl) who affirms what is essential to the human image.<sup>285</sup>

The testimonies and behaviour of prisoners indicate that the performance of rituals may have allowed them, at least momentarily, to break with the reality of Auschwitz. The sense of temporal continuity, the voluntary performance of physical acts, and the connection

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<sup>278</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), 34-36.

<sup>279</sup> Landes, “Spiritual Responses,” 265.

<sup>280</sup> Cited in Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 3.

<sup>281</sup> Landes, “Spiritual Responses,” 265.

<sup>282</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 94.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>284</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 29.

<sup>285</sup> David Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness*, 91.

with their pasts enabled some inmates to assert their identities and their pre-traumatic selves in a place created to obliterate them.

## **CHAPTER TWO: RABBIS IN AUSCHWITZ**

*The grave chant of a rabbi reciting the Kaddish,  
the murmur of his followers going after him  
to the very end, to Heaven.*<sup>286</sup>

From the first stages of the Nazi occupation, Eastern European rabbis were subjected to particularly cruel humiliation and assault. Then, in the ‘Final Solution’ phase, rabbis were either among the first to be murdered or made the targets of vicious abuse.<sup>287</sup> At the outset of the Holocaust, rabbis across Europe found themselves in diverse circumstances and, as expected, their reactions to persecution were not uniform. A few took the opportunity to flee individually and save themselves, but many other rabbis chose to stay with their congregations, performing religious ceremonies and leading them in prayer up until their final moments.<sup>288</sup> It is unknown how many rabbis were sent to Auschwitz, as well as how many of them died there. But 80% of the world’s rabbis perished during the Holocaust;<sup>289</sup> and out of the 2,500 rabbis living in Poland before 1939, only around one hundred were alive by 1945 (a mere 4%).<sup>290</sup> These figures shed light on the ferocity with which the rabbinate was cracked down and victimised.

This chapter will look at how rabbis carried out their role in Auschwitz – that is, what they did and what they said to offer spiritual support to their fellow Jewish inmates. It will explore how rabbis encouraged religious life inside Auschwitz, and helped Jews navigate the camp life according to Judaism’s principles by giving rulings on *halakhic* questions. Moreover, it will also discuss the different theological explanations of the meaning of the Holocaust which rabbis offered Jewish inmates in order to buttress their faith. It will look at how rabbis strategically referred to Biblical times and scripture to support those theodicies; as well as how much they could actually safeguard the belief system of Jewish prisoners within the camp environment. Finally, it will explore how some Jewish prisoners, who were not rabbis, took on rabbinical attitudes and roles in supporting the religious faith and observance of fellow inmates.

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<sup>286</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 186.

<sup>287</sup> Dan Michman, “Jewish Religious Life,” 156.

<sup>288</sup> One example is Rabbi Zvi Ezekiel Michelson from the Warsaw ghetto, who decided to accompany his congregation on the death transport to Treblinka, where he was murdered on August 25<sup>th</sup> 1942. See Dworzecki, “Day-to-Day,” 161.

<sup>289</sup> Roth and Berenbaum, ““Where is God Now?”” 261.

<sup>290</sup> Grabski and Stankowski, “Jewish Religious Life,” 254.

## The Role of the Rabbi

Jewish tradition considers the rabbi to be the official spiritual leader of the community and the presiding judge. As such, rabbis carried out a variety of functions, like officiating religious ceremonies and supervising synagogues and religious schools. Rabbis could also serve as *dayyanim* (judges) in rabbinical courts, where they would rule on *halakhic* questions concerning all aspects of religious life. They would even take on quite a political function as spokesperson for the Jewish community with local government officials or visiting state dignitaries. Lastly, rabbis were scholars and teachers – having studied in a *yeshiva*, rabbis would spend much of their time writing litigations on theological issues and new insights into Torah interpretation. Since the nineteenth-century, rabbis had also become preachers – from giving weekly sermons to major addresses on the High Holy Days. Through these, the rabbi spread his rich knowledge among his congregation, educating and encouraging them to live a *halakhic* life.<sup>291</sup> It should be noted that, unlike the Christian priest, in Judaism the rabbi is not considered to be a mediator between man and God. Instead, he bore the responsibility of ensuring that his flock did not stray too far from the authentic path of Judaism.<sup>292</sup>

As the spiritual head, the rabbi had to be perceived as the embodiment of Jewish justice and morality. He was also expected to act as the community's protector, helping widows, orphans, and families in need.<sup>293</sup> During the interwar period, the status of rabbis as community leaders appeared to have declined over the past century (except among the strictly Orthodox).<sup>294</sup> However, in the face of Nazi persecution, guarding over the community's belief structures, identity and ethical foundations acquired urgent importance; and upon entering the hell of the concentration camp, this monumental task proved more challenging than ever.

Rabbis had long recognised the need to strengthen the ordinary Jew psychologically and spiritually to face an increasingly hostile world.<sup>295</sup> When levels of persecution heightened dramatically in 1941, religious leaders felt an acute sense of urgency towards the rapid deterioration of Judaism – they were confronted by the alarming uncertainty of what would be left of Jewish religious life after the mass killing happening around them.<sup>296</sup> They then saw

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<sup>291</sup> Ury, "Impressions of Religious Life," 57-60.

<sup>292</sup> Wasserstein, *On the Eve*, 132.

<sup>293</sup> Ury, "Impressions of Religious Life," 59.

<sup>294</sup> Wasserstein, *On the Eve*, 132.

<sup>295</sup> Joseph Walk, "Jewish Education Under the Nazis: An Example of Resistance to the Totalitarian Regime," in *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Conference on Manifestations of Jewish Resistance, Jerusalem, April 7-11, 1968* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1971), 123.

<sup>296</sup> Kerenji, *Jewish Responses*, 454.

it as their task to reinforce the Jew's affinity to the Jewish community and religious tradition.<sup>297</sup>

In the camp context, in particular, rabbis saw their role as moving on two planes: on the one hand, to give comfort and hope to those not yet killed, and, on the other, to provide spiritual help and consolation to the doomed, easing their path to an imminent death.<sup>298</sup> This sentiment is embodied in a statement made by Rabbi David Shapiro to Rabbi Menachem Ziemba and Rabbi Samson Stockhammer in early spring 1943 (quoted by Berkovits), when the Catholic Church of Warsaw had offered to save the last three rabbis of the city's ghetto, and these three men assembled to discuss whether to flee: "It is clear to us that we cannot help the remaining Jews in the ghetto at all. However, the very fact that we do not leave them, that we stay with them, may give them some encouragement. I cannot leave these people."<sup>299</sup> With this understanding, the three rabbis decided to refuse the offer and stay with their community; only Shapiro would survive the war.

Moreover, many rabbis were convinced that faith and a close relationship with God could greatly benefit the individual's mental wellbeing, and consequently, increase their chances of survival. This notion is clearly expressed in an address delivered by Orthodox Rabbi Shlomoh Zalman Unsdorfer in a synagogue in Bratislava, August 1943:

We see instances every day of evil ones, who did not know God and were estranged from faith and trust. ...They have nothing to rely upon. They abandon hope and possibility...Not so with the righteous, who fulfil God's commandments and trust in God with all their heart and soul. They do not get depressed. They strengthen themselves through every attitude that extends to them. They put themselves under the protection of the Blessed Creator in every respect, to the point that they are prepared to sacrifice their body and soul should that be His will. They have no true anguish, because they have faith about what is prepared for them in the world to come. This is the true blessing. Happiness is found in following God's commandments and in fearing God.<sup>300</sup>

Unsdorfer was later murdered in Auschwitz in May 1944. Those who shared this view often made every effort to encourage Jews to hold on to their religious faith and, if possible,

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<sup>297</sup> Walk, "Jewish Education," 127.

<sup>298</sup> Glass, *Jewish Resistance*, 150.

<sup>299</sup> Cited in Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 97.

<sup>300</sup> Shlomoh Zalman Unsdorfer, "[Torah Portion] *Re'eh* [Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17] [Prepared 27 August for 28 August 1943 Delivery]," in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust*, eds. Steven Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 59.

observance. If an inmate had deeply internalized values to draw strength from, these could greatly help him resist a system which denied them. To help Jews resist the Nazi assault on their core beliefs, rabbis strove to counter the Nazi narrative of the Jews by holding on to biblical and Talmudic interpretations which reinforced Jewish cultural identity. They presented a vision of the Jewish self in which the suffering they were experiencing possessed a divine significance.<sup>301</sup>

## **Rabbis in the Camp**

### *Rabbinical attitudes and faith*

Survivor testimony overwhelmingly depicts a theologically unshakeable rabbinate who acted with great courage and spiritual resilience in the face of intolerable assault.<sup>302</sup> Even in the extremity of Auschwitz, Wiesel speaks of how the religious leadership would never give in and collaborate with the Nazis: “You could not have found one single rabbi...among all the *kapos* or among any of the other positions of power in the camp. ...It is a wonder how these rabbis maintained their Jewishness and their humanity.”<sup>303</sup> Perseverance of this kind was highly admirable in the camp situation – as Levi noted in his memoir: “Survival without renunciation of any part of one’s moral world...was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints.”<sup>304</sup>

Rabbis are also said to have demonstrated incredible bravery and resoluteness when going to their death. Rabbi Moshe Friedman of Boyan, a highly regarded personality of pre-war Poland, arrived in Auschwitz on a transport with other distinguished Jews during Passover 1944. According to a story presented by Berkovits, as they were undressing prior to entering the gas chambers, the rabbi is said to have walked up to an *Oberscharführer*, grasped the lapel of his jacket and said to him a strong voice: “You are the most despicable murderers in the world; do not imagine that you will succeed in destroying the Jewish people. The Jewish people will live forever.”<sup>305</sup> He then proceeded to cover his head,<sup>306</sup> and call out with great fervour the *Shema*, “Hear O Israel!” The dignified attitude of the rabbi served as an example to those around him, who joined in with him, echoing also other traditional words of affirmation.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Glass, *Jewish Resistance*, 107.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>303</sup> Rubenstein and Wiesel, “Exchange,” 366.

<sup>304</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 103.

<sup>305</sup> Cited in Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 110-111.

<sup>306</sup> Jewish law dictates that men should cover their heads during prayer, as a way of “honouring God.”

<sup>307</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 111.

Many rabbis also demonstrated unshakeable faith. According to Berkovits, in Birkenau, as Rabbi Shalom Eliezer Halberstam of Ratzert was being led to the gas chambers, an SS officer supposedly approached him and, seeing his lips moving in prayer, asked him how he could still believe that God would help him as the Jews were being led to die. The rabbi is said to have responded: “With all my heart and all my soul I believe that there is a Creator and that there is a Supreme Providence.”<sup>308</sup> Müller also speaks of an Orthodox Jew who had been in training to become a rabbi, forced to work in the *Sonderkommando*: “But even in the surroundings of a concentration camp, he never once lost his faith in God.”<sup>309</sup> The man acted as the spiritual leader of a group of strictly Orthodox Jews, “which was small, and clung to him, misunderstood and isolated.”<sup>310</sup>

Of course, not all rabbis managed to hold on to their faith as firmly at all times. This was especially challenging during the days of the selections. Wiesel related the case of a rabbi from a small town in Poland who was constantly praying and reciting the Talmud. Yet one day, he said:

It’s over. God is no longer with us. ...No one has the right to say things like that. I know that very well. ...But what can someone like myself do? I’m neither a sage nor just a man. I am not a saint. I’m a simple creature of flesh and bone. I suffer hell in my soul and my flesh. I also have eyes and I see what is being done here. Where is God’s mercy? Where’s God? How can I believe, how can anyone believe in this God of mercy?<sup>311</sup>

#### *Upholding religious life among prisoners*

According to Rabbi Unsorfer from Bratislava, true happiness and well-being lied in following God’s commandments, even when they seemed opaque and seemingly harmful.<sup>312</sup> Many like-minded rabbis played an important role in fomenting the observance of the *mitzvot* among inmates. For Hasidic men in the camp, a sacred space was concentrated wherever the rabbi was present or, in his absence, where his teachings had been promulgated.<sup>313</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Elimelech Rabinowitz from the Polish town of Radomsko, in an effort to encourage religious activity in Auschwitz during the summer of 1942, sang sacred songs and discussed the Torah with fellow inmates. It was said that, “during those moments, the afflictions melted

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>309</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 66.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 94-95.

<sup>312</sup> Kerenji, *Jewish Responses*, 461.

<sup>313</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 72.

away.”<sup>314</sup> From this description, the communal activity seemingly resembles the Hasidic ritual of the *tisch*.<sup>315</sup> Another example is that of Rabbi Yehoshua Eichenstein, whose greatness was spoken of by several Auschwitz survivors. Once Eichenstein managed to obtain *tefillin*, he prayed in them daily and would rise early in the morning and would go from man to man encouraging them to put them on themselves, even if only for a few secretive moments of prayer – “He was a source of strength to all those with whom he came into contact. It was said of him that he kindled in the hearts of many sparks of joy, faith, and trust.”<sup>316</sup>

Rabbi Marzel would preach a sermon before Auschwitz prisoners every day; he explained that through this act he sought to buttress his audience’s mental state so they did not surrender to the awareness of a certain death and try to commit suicide – an act which is forbidden by Jewish law, as he saw people walking to the electric fences every day. He would wake up even earlier and preach publicly before the roll call to up to fifty people who gathered every day. In these sermons, he implored them: “Do not be broken! ...Yes, we will all die. But every additional minute of life is a triumph.”<sup>317</sup>

### *Rulings on Halakhic Questions*

Due to traditional observance being so radically disrupted, rabbis constructed more lenient interpretations of religious law to support people’s efforts to maintain religious practice. For example, a question was raised about the propriety of early morning services. Traditionally, the service should take place after sunrise, but, since the participants had to rise before the rest of the inmates, the service was held while it was still night. Rabbis delivered a *halakhic* ruling that since there was no other possibility for such services, especially as they had to happen in secret, it was permissible to arrange them while it was still dark.<sup>318</sup>

Rabbis also had to provide theological guidance in morally problematic dilemmas. This was an especially difficult task within the concentration camp universe, where morality often seemed to have been inverted and pre-existing standards of behaviour no longer applied.<sup>319</sup> Morally ambiguous scenarios came up during selections for the crematoria, since

<sup>314</sup> Rachmani, “Liminality Rituals,” 14.

<sup>315</sup> The *tish* is a festive meal at which followers gather around the Rebbe to sing songs and melodies or sit silently, while the Rebbe offers an exposition on the Torah. Although it customarily takes place in the major feasts, it can also be celebrated on other occasions. See Rachmani, “Liminality Rituals,” 14.

<sup>316</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 10.

<sup>317</sup> Cited in Rachmani, “Liminality Rituals,” 14.

<sup>318</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 4.

<sup>319</sup> Adam Brown, “Witnessing Moral Compromise: ‘Privilege’, Judgement and Holocaust Testimony,” *Life Writing* 14, no.3 (2017): 327.

the Germans were interested only in that an exact quota was reached, so deals could be made with *kapos* to release someone if another took their place. In one case, a group of young boys had been selected; among them were some students from Rabbi Meisel's former *yeshiva*. The rabbi was approached by another former student of his, who offered to be exchanged for one of the 'selected'. He claimed that, while he himself was mediocre, the other boy was an outstanding student and, if he lived, he would become a great *Talmid Hakham* – a scholar and spiritual leader of enormous value for the future of Judaism. Perhaps this was the case, but the rabbi forbade him from sacrificing himself, telling him that the principle "Your life comes first" had to be applied.<sup>320</sup>

Rabbi Meisels found himself in a similar situation on the eve of *Rosh Hashanah* in 1944, when a group of around 1,400 children were taken to heavily guarded barracks, and rumours spread that they would be murdered in the gas chambers. A German Jew went up to the rabbi and told him:

Rabbi, my only son is there among the boys...and I am able to get him released. However, I since I know that if they release my son they will take another boy in his place, I have come to ask you for a decision in accordance with the *halakhah*, so that I may act upon it. I desire a ruling according to the law of the Torah. Am I allowed to redeem my son? As you will rule, so I will do.<sup>321</sup>

In this case, however, the rabbi recalls being overcome by fear at the thought of having to give the man a decision. The Torah obligated the man to ask a rabbi, and there were no other rabbis around. Still, Meisels did not want to bear the responsibility, recalling that at the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, matters concerning life and death were brought before the Great Sanhedrin.<sup>322</sup> Meisels felt that by himself, he could not possibly give a ruling in Auschwitz, where there were no source books to research the problem, or colleagues with whom to take counsel. The deprivation of camp life did not allow him a sufficiently alert mind to adequately deal with such weighty issues. Though the man pleaded, Meisels refused to give him a ruling. Finally, the man told him that if he cannot give an answer, it means the rabbi does not know beyond any doubt that such an act would be permissible by the *halakhah*: "For me it means that I am not permitted to save my son. I accept this with love and joy. I

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<sup>320</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 38-39.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>322</sup> The Great Sanhedrin was the supreme court of ancient Israel, made up by 71 judges.

refrain.”<sup>323</sup> In this case, even if the rabbi could not, the Torah spoke to this father from his own Jewish consciousness and provided him with an answer.

### **Theological Explanations**

Rabbinic Judaism assures that God’s presence dwells among the daily life of the people of Israel.<sup>324</sup> Within Auschwitz, there was an urgent need for rabbis to provide theological interpretations of what was happening around prisoners. Since, according to Jewish tradition, nothing of such magnitude can happen on earth which is not in accordance to God’s will, then, logically, the present suffering of Jews had a purpose and justification in the mind of God.<sup>325</sup> These tenets led to much theological reflection and speculation among inmates, who struggled to understand God’s role in the carnage surrounding them. During the catastrophic event itself, Jews were eager to know its meaning, its implications, and its place in history; in the words of Wiesel: “we felt a need to understand.”<sup>326</sup> Many Jews sensed that an explanation might ease their suffering, so they looked to rabbis for one. Upon such demands, rabbis formulated religious hypotheses employing age-old theological concepts which could reconcile the belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God with the suffering of Auschwitz.<sup>327</sup> By definition, a theodicy refers to any attempt by religious actors to defend, explain, or accept as meaningful the relationship between God and evil. In short, a theodicy constitutes the justification of God in the face of evil.<sup>328</sup>

A convincing theodicy could help believers to make sense of their suffering and preserve the credibility of their pre-Holocaust worlds.<sup>329</sup> The following sections will analyse the two most prominent theological interpretations of the present situation in Auschwitz which were offered by rabbis.

#### *A Test of Faith*

The first theodicy offered by rabbis urged Jews to accept Auschwitz as an unfathomable mystery and to not let it affect their faith. It based on two concepts: the incomprehensibility of God’s ways, and His testing of Jewish faith. Judaism had long espoused that catastrophic events (like military defeat or a famine) were expressions of divine will; these would make

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<sup>323</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 43.

<sup>324</sup> Jacobs, *Jewish Theology*, 63.

<sup>325</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 133.

<sup>326</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 45.

<sup>327</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 90.

<sup>328</sup> Zachary Braiterman, “Anti/theodicy Faith in the Thought of Eliezer Berkovits,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1997): 83.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

sense over the long range of divine time.<sup>330</sup> Because the human mind is limited and temporal, it cannot understand God's mysterious ways. Thus, rabbis reminded doubting Jews that people cannot evaluate God's mercy or righteousness according to human criteria; instead, they should yield to God's wisdom and accept the reality which He has determined.<sup>331</sup> In short, all which emanates from God is good, though its understanding might be hidden to man; suffering must therefore be accepted with love and sacrifice on the basis of faith and unquestioning trust in God's ultimate justice.<sup>332</sup> Rabbis recited the famous aphorism attributed to the Chofetz Chaim: "With faith there are no questions, without faith there are no answers."<sup>333</sup>

In this light, many rabbis assured Jewish prisoners that their suffering was a supreme test of faith. Throughout history, Jews have always been victimized, and each calamity is seen as further proof of God's presence and special relationship with Israel. Jews must rise up to the challenge, even if it is not clear why they are being tested.<sup>334</sup> Rabbis argued that it is God's prerogative to continuously challenge man's faith, and Auschwitz was but one, however enormous, of many challenges – a modern *Akedah* (the sacrifice of Isaac). It was precisely during this terrible time, rabbis argued, that it was most important to prove one's faith to God. As Rabbi Unsorfer wrote a few months before he was deported to Auschwitz:

In times of peace and quiet, plenty and pleasantness, it is enough for a person to say that he loves God. ...But now we are at a time when we are in trouble. We have been given over to killing and derision among the nations. ... Now we are required to show extra love for God, lest we be called complainers, heaven forbid. Rather, we should accept God's decrees with love, with this we show our love, like a son for his father.<sup>335</sup>

### *Divine Retribution*

Rabbinic Judaism has explained suffering as divine punishment for Israel's transgression or disobedience for thousands of years. Several rabbis retained this view in Auschwitz, telling prisoners that the suffering around them had been deemed an appropriate punishment by God for a terrible sin that Jews had committed, making it entirely justifiable.<sup>336</sup> This great sin, they

<sup>330</sup> Roth and Berenbaum, "“Where is God Now?”", 260.

<sup>331</sup> Greenberg, "Orthodox Jewish Thought," 324.

<sup>332</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 147.

<sup>333</sup> Cited in Hass, *The Aftermath*, 148.

<sup>334</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 106.

<sup>335</sup> Unsorfer, "Re'eh," 59.

<sup>336</sup> Schweid, "Justification for Religion," 396.

claimed, was the Jewish integration into European society during the last century, and their consequent departure from God and Judaism.<sup>337</sup> This abandonment of religion, even by only one portion of Jews, had supposedly unleashed the massive suffering prisoners endured.

This view had already surfaced among the ultra-Orthodox before the Holocaust as a reaction to religious reform and the distancing of the younger pre-war generation from the *mitzvot* and Torah learning.<sup>338</sup> Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1839-1933), popularly known as the Chofetz Chaim, warned that when Jews lose Torah observance, evil emerges: “To restore the memory of identity, God surrounds Israel with enemies.”<sup>339</sup>

An important consideration within this theodicy is the belief that God punishes those he loves, as His wish is to instruct and discipline man into following His Torahic teachings.<sup>340</sup> Rabbi Unsдорfer explained this theodicy through the following analogy:

We are children to God and He is our father. Similarly, a discerning son loves his father all the time, even if the father chastises him with a rod. Because he knows that a father does not hate a son. He loves him always and only wants what is good for him. ... This should indicate to us that with everything that happens to us, all is of His goodness toward us. We also need to conduct ourselves like children toward Him and not question His ways, heaven forbid. For justice is with Him.<sup>341</sup>

### *References to Biblical Times and Sacred Texts*

A strategy employed by multiple rabbis in their efforts to explain the unfolding events consisted of drawing from historical parallels to imply that what they were living through was comparable to trials the Jews had undergone in earlier times.<sup>342</sup> Hence, religious leaders drew heavily from the vital Jewish tradition to offer sustenance and consolation to their community.<sup>343</sup> In Auschwitz, linear time had become intrinsically linked to death, but mythic time could still be associated with life and hope. In a reality of horror, through the invocation of mythic times (the original bondage by the Pharaohs in Egypt and the Exodus), rabbis sought to give meaning to current suffering.<sup>344</sup> The words of the *Haggadah* not only

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<sup>337</sup> Kerenji, *Jewish Responses*, 461.

<sup>338</sup> Greenberg, “Orthodox Jewish Thought,” 328.

<sup>339</sup> Cited in Hass, *The Aftermath*, 146.

<sup>340</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 206.

<sup>341</sup> Unsдорfer, “*Re’eh*,” 58-59.

<sup>342</sup> Kerenji, *Jewish Responses*, 456.

<sup>343</sup> Greenberg, “Orthodox Jewish Thought,” 321.

<sup>344</sup> Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 36.

represented the present reality, but also promised release and freedom.<sup>345</sup> Müller's memoir speaks of an instance when a couple of prisoners approached a rabbi after a massive number of Jewish prayer books and religious works were taken to crematorium 3. They showed him the books and urged him to admit that it was naïve to still believe in the existence of God. The Dajan referred to examples from history to explain to the angry men that as long as humanity had existed, inhumanity like that in Auschwitz had always taken place – that, even if in a different form, everything that was happening around them was nothing new, but only a repetition of past events. He tried to explain the meaning of the Bible – it does not only tell the history of the Jews, but also the expression of an eternal law stating: “What happened to the fathers is an omen to their descendants.”<sup>346</sup> He reportedly went on to clarify further:

The pious Jew does not read the Bible like a legend, but applies its context to the present. ...When on the eve of the *Seder* I hear the biblical verses on the more than 300-year-old oppression by the Pharaohs, I experience again the earlier events as our fathers experienced them in the time of Roman dominion or in the dark days of the Middle Ages. And if the *Haggadah* commands man in each generation to look at himself as if he himself had migrated from Egypt, the brothers who perhaps by miracle will manage to survive will read the *Haggadah*, made whole by their experiences in Auschwitz, Majdanek or Treblinka. In every generation, my brothers, there are Pharaohs who wanted to exterminate us, but – praise be the Most Holy – He has always rescued up from their hands.<sup>347</sup>

In this view, the Bible applies to the Jew's present, and Jewish history is understood ahistorically. While under normal circumstances the Jew enters the past only vicariously through the reading of scripture and commemorative ritual observance, in times of hardship they experience a re-enactment of previous travail with their own physical self. What the rabbi tries to convey is that, in a mystical sense, Egypt and Auschwitz are the same event, happening to the same people – Israel – only in different centuries and geographical locations. Seeing contemporary bondage as the bondage of Egypt sparked the hope that, as redemption had followed the Egyptian bondage, the same redemption would reach them in Auschwitz.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> The *Haggadah* is a Jewish text setting the order of the Passover *Seder*, which commemorates the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt.

<sup>346</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 66-67.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Landes, “Spiritual Responses,” 269.

Particular stories from the Bible were also employed so as to convince the Jews that their persecution and suffering did not mean that God had abandoned them. The story of David, the King of Israel who constantly endured persecution was often referenced – “However, with his great trust in God he strengthened himself whenever there was trouble and he did not despair.” During times of darkness, the spirit of God called to David: “You are of the children of the Lord our God, completely trusting that everything will be for your good, magnifying His name and raising the horn of His messiah.”<sup>349</sup> Through the story of King David, rabbis tried to send the message that Auschwitz prisoners should also trust that their current suffering was part of God’s plan, and consequently, for their own good, even if they could not appreciate it at the time.

Jewish liturgy was cited to support these theodicies. For example, Leviticus 26 was quoted as proof that God was unleashing a punishment for the Jews’ disobedience:<sup>350</sup>

But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring on you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and sap your strength. ...I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you. ...If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve. I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children ...I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense altars and pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols, and I will abhor you.’ [Lev 26:14-30]

The link between this passage and the notion of divine retribution is of course blatantly obvious. By referring to it, rabbis reminded Jewish prisoners that God himself had warned Jews that they would pay for their sins through a punishment which He considered appropriate. This part of liturgy referenced specific afflictions which European Jews experienced during the Holocaust, and more so in Auschwitz – terror, physically-crushing diseases, being ruled over by the bestial Nazis, having their children taken away, the destruction of their holy places and objects, and finally, the piles of dead bodies. Therefore, it

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<sup>349</sup> Unsderfer, “*Re’eh*,” 60.

<sup>350</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “Holocaust Survivor’s Faith,” 418.

made the rabbi's message all the more credible: we have sinned, and God is punishing us just as He said he would.

### *Kiddush Hashem*

Some rabbis framed the mass death surrounding prisoners as the sacrificial precondition for the coming of the Messiah.<sup>351</sup> According to this line of thinking, through Jewish martyrdom all nations will recognize the one true God. The long-time Jewish tradition of *Kiddush Hashem* (the Sanctification of God's Name) presents dying in a dignified, accepting and proud way, rather than denouncing God, as a religious act.<sup>352</sup> For example, Müller related that the young rabbinical student and *Dayan* rose up from the ranks during the final selection at Birkenau in November 1944, before the camp's evacuation and spoke to the crowd saying:

‘Brothers! It is God’s unfathomable will that we are to lay down our lives.  
...No miracle has happened. Heaven has sent no avenging bolts of lightning. ...We must submit to the inevitable with Jewish resignation. It will be the last trial sent to us by heaven. It is not for us to question the reasons, for we are nothing before Almighty God. Be not afraid of death!  
...Therefore, brothers, let us now go to meet death bravely and with dignity!’<sup>353</sup>

For many Jews, particularly the ultra-Orthodox, martyrdom was a comforting thought. The belief that one's death in some way sanctified God served to diminish the individual's panic by giving divine meaning to their tribulations. This notion allowed the doomed prisoner to relativize the suffering of the present by framing it in the context of a glorious future. It also let them feel that they were not completely passive victims – dying for God indicated a degree of choice, even if they did not wish to die. They also received comfort and reassurance from the idea that when a final judgement takes place, they would be rewarded for their suffering in the world to come, and that the evil enemy would be punished.<sup>354</sup>

### *Limitations*

However much rabbis appealed to Biblical stories, sacred text and the concept of martyrdom, the credibility of their theodicies was undermined by the very context in which they were espoused. Many prisoners found it impossible to fully accept theological explanations simply

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<sup>351</sup> Richard Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and its Legacy* (Kentucky: Westminster Jon Knox Press, 2003), 330.

<sup>352</sup> Dworzecki, “Day-to-Day,” 161.

<sup>353</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 161.

<sup>354</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 98-100.

because of what they saw happening around them in Auschwitz. Jewish liturgy speaks of God as a merciful father, but Nazi cruelty had obliterated the mere memory of mercy; Jewish prayer speaks of a God who answers His people in their time of need, but never had the Jews needed God more, and never had He been less available to them than during their time in Auschwitz.<sup>355</sup> Furthermore, rabbis struggled to convince fellow inmates that the Jews' sins were the primary explanation for their cruel fate – no sin attributable to them seemed to justify a punishment of this scale, especially in comparison to the sins of the nations murdering them. On the contrary, if any situation had ever existed throughout history which required divine intervention for salvation, it was that which Jews endured in Auschwitz. How could religious leaders speak of God's justice when the Jew was targeted for destruction simply because of the identity of one grandparent?

Testimonies relay many examples of Jews who challenged rabbis on their theodicies. In his memoir, Polish Jew, Yehiel De-Nur, recalled addressing a rabbi in Auschwitz: “‘At last you must admit, Rabbi, that God of the Diaspora himself is climbing into his truck – a *muszulman*.’”<sup>356</sup> Through this statement, De-Nur urges the religious leader to accept that God is indeed abandoning them, that He is no longer capable of protecting the Jews. Müller also relates how a 20-year-old named Menachem confronted his former religious teacher: “‘Not once have I felt even a breath of divine justice here. Absolutely everything that you stuffed into my head in school was nonsense. There is no God, and if there is one, he is an ox and a bastard!’”<sup>357</sup> Indeed, it makes sense that many Jewish inmates found it ultimately impossible to accept the explanations provided by the rabbis; so much of what they were seeing happen in Auschwitz contradicted what rabbinic Judaism espoused. Rabbis could only do so much to sustain the faith of other Jews, but testimony suggests that many nevertheless persevered in their efforts to do so. In this sense, many rabbis demonstrated significant determination and a commendable sense of duty.

### **Religious Influences by Non-Rabbis**

Victims' testimonies often relate how ordinary Jews came to act as rabbis in the setting of Auschwitz, encouraging their fellow inmates to hold on to their faith and religious

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<sup>355</sup> Roth and Berenbaum, “Where is God Now?,” 261.

<sup>356</sup> Ka-tzetnik 135633 (Yehiel De-Nur), *Shivitti: A Vision*, trans. Eliyah De-Nur and Lisa Herman (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 7. *Muszulman* or *muselmann* was a slang term commonly used in concentration camps for those in the final stage of emaciation, suffering of hunger and exhaustion to the point of total resignation. This state inevitably brought about a radical decline in motor and mental activities. See Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 199-201.

<sup>357</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 66.

observance. Some religious Jews felt so strongly the importance of prayer, that they urged their fellow inmates to do so. For example, Müller recalls an instance when the *Sonderkommando* found two extra portions of bread that had been meant for two French prisoners, killed moments ago. After Fischl divided and distributed the bread, the men instantly devoured the extra rations. He, on the other hand, began muttering a prayer – the *kaddish*. Seeing that the men had already started eating, an enraged Fischl hit them with his fists, yelling in Yiddish, “‘All you can do is gobble, but you can’t be bothered to pray for the dead whose bread you’re gobbling!’”<sup>358</sup> Müller continues, “When he finished his prayers he looked more peaceable. A little later he said quietly: ‘Man differs from animals in that he believes in God. ...It’s prayer which makes you a human being.’”<sup>359</sup> After that incident, Fischl included the men in his religious practice, telling them, “‘The Lord will help! Time to pray, lads!’” Müller goes on, “While he was praying, he gave us a signal when it was time for us to rise. Every time he nodded his head after a certain passage, we responded by saying ‘Amen’.”<sup>360</sup> We cannot know for sure what Fischl intentions were; it would seem that he was encouraging the men to hold on to their humanity, what differentiates them from animals – that is, to shield their pre-Holocaust identities from the bestiality of Auschwitz.

Similarly, every night after all the *kapos* and SS women had gone to sleep, the Hungarian girl with a *siddur* would read chapters from the Book of Psalms to the other girls, first in the Hebrew original and then in translated Yiddish. She chose mainly verses of comfort and consolation, “the wicked will return to the nether world ...like the chaff that the wind disperses” – she assured the others that Heaven would take its vengeance on the Nazi murderers, whether they themselves lived to see it or not.<sup>361</sup> Judith Isaacson also spoke of a woman called Lea Paskusz, who on the *Sabbath* would lead young girls in prayer and bless them in Hebrew: “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee. The Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. ...We’ve suffered like Job, girls. Please God, it may soon be over.”<sup>362</sup>

Prisoners often encouraged the celebration of Holy Days in Auschwitz. Many even took on the responsibility of recreating the appropriate religious service as a rabbi would have traditionally performed it. This took place during Passover in 1943, when after communal prayer, the public had scattered but a Hungarian Jew spoke out: “Jews, don’t forget that it’s

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>361</sup> Berkovits, *With God In Hell*, 18.

<sup>362</sup> Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah*, 81-82.

Passover today, we must hold a *Seder*.” The man proceeded to enact the *Seder*, by reciting the *Haggadah*. When he got to the prayer “Pour out Your wrath,” he stood up and implored: “Jews, I tell you, this may be the time of favour and we must pray and ask that our haters be extinguished.” The congregants repeated after him, “Pour out Your wrath.”<sup>363</sup>

Pearl Benisch, a Jewess from Krakow, also related how her friend Rivkah led the *Hanukkah* celebration in 1944, with over a thousand girls assembling, and, through it, attempted to strengthen the faith of her fellow inmates. Much like the rabbis, Rivkah referenced biblical times to frame Auschwitz within the larger historical travails of the Jews: “Our people has lived through many bitter times. Our Temple was defiled, desecrated. We’ve been beaten, tortured, and killed. Pharaoh, Haman, the Romans, the Crusaders – they all sought to destroy the Jewish people. They failed; God helped us throughout history. He will help us now, too...and soon we will see the redemption. The torch the Jews carry in the darkness of night will never be extinguished.”<sup>364</sup>

Even in the face of imminent death, some pious Jews found the strength to offer comfort and spiritual guidance to the doomed around them. They led others to meet death with dignity and unwavering faith. For example, Müller recalls that a group of Jews assembled in the crematorium yard, knowing full well what awaited them. After undressing, these people were seized by fear and helplessness. Suddenly, from within the crowd, the loud voice of an emaciated man was heard; he begun reciting the *Viddui* (the final confessional prayer); “My God, before ever I was created I signified nothing...I am dust in life and how much more so in death. I will praise you everlastingly, Lord, God everlasting. Amen! Amen!” The crowd of around two thousand repeated every word – “Now almost everyone was weeping. But their tears were not tears of despair. These people were in a state of deep religious emotion. They had put themselves in God’s hands.”<sup>365</sup> Through prayer, the man spoke to all the Jews around him, reminding them that their lives are insignificant in comparison to God’s will and His plan for humanity. This is the same understanding promoted by rabbis, which offered Jews a sense that they were sacrificing their lives to sanctify God’s Name.

Many survivors have spoken of the value of such individuals, who, whether they were rabbis or not, prayed and demanded prayer of others, even in the midst of horror. In fact, some even credit the recovery of Jewish life and tradition after the Holocaust to these people.

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<sup>363</sup> Cited in Rachmani, “Ritual Existence,” 44-45.

<sup>364</sup> Benisch, *Vanquish the Dragon*, 364-366.

<sup>365</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 70.

Eugene Heimler, a Hungarian Jew who survived Auschwitz, stated that he believes that the Jews have managed to withstand persecution across the centuries because of the “long-bearded men...who studied the Holy Books day and night throughout thousands of years; who believed every word of the Torah, the Old Testament...who could bring colour and gaiety into their prayers, and joy into their communication with God.”<sup>366</sup>

The testimony of survivors tends to speak of rabbis with great admiration. Even among secular voices, virtually no criticism of these men can be found.<sup>367</sup> Their words are perhaps the most authentic testament to the role and value of the religious leadership within the context of Auschwitz. It is interesting, however, how the survivors’ post-Holocaust evaluation of the attitudes and actions of rabbis, which portray them in a very positive light, does not necessarily reflect the full spectrum of views that prisoners had of their religious leadership while they were still in the camp. At that time, as the variety of testimonies presented suggest, the attitude of Jews towards the rabbis was far more nuanced – many indeed received comfort from them; but many others were exasperated by their attempts at encouraging religiosity, and even ardently rejected their discourse.

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<sup>366</sup> Eugene Heimler, *Night of the Mist*, trans. Andre Ungar (New York: Vanguard, 1959), 17-18.

<sup>367</sup> Glass, *Jewish Resistance*, 107.

### **CHAPTER THREE: FAITH IN AUSCHWITZ**

*Where was God in all this? It seemed as impossible to conceive of Auschwitz with God as to conceive of Auschwitz without God. Therefore, everything had to be reassessed, because everything had changed.*<sup>368</sup>

Religious faith is primarily an inward stance or attitude. Unlike religious practices, faith and belief were always possible regardless of circumstances – since it was not dependant on tangible actions, one could always “remain a believing Jew in one’s heart.”<sup>369</sup> On the other hand, its inward nature means that less concrete evidence exists for the persistence of faith than of ritual observance. It must be bore in mind that the lack of a declaration of faith in God does not necessarily mean a complete abandonment or condemnation of Judaism.

This chapter will look at how Auschwitz challenged the traditional Jewish vision of God as benevolent and omnipotent. It will also survey the testimony of inmates who either maintained or enhance their faith during their time in Auschwitz; and explore the meaning they gave to their experiences at that time –that it was a test of faith since God’s ways are incomprehensible; that it was a divine punishment for the Jews; or that the events unfolding had nothing to do with God at all. It will also look at how believers questioned God, while maintaining their faith; and how others ignored the issue of faith entirely during their incarceration. Moreover, it will look at the inmates who lost their faith – distinguishing between those who rationally abandoned their belief system, and those who denied God’s existence out of feeling abandoned by Him. It will also discuss how an individual’s faith could be lost and recovered at different times and circumstances. Finally, it will assess the impact that religious faith had on the mental state of the prisoner, and how it may have affected their camp experience. It is unclear whether religious belief preserved sanity or whether it actually saved any lives, but, according to political scientist James Glass, enough evidence exists to suggest that it did make a difference.<sup>370</sup>

In Auschwitz, the issue of religious faith became increasingly complex – naturally so, considering a person’s mind often reflects the upheavals on their surroundings.<sup>371</sup> This happened through a nuanced, non-linear process which presented itself differently in every

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<sup>368</sup> Elie Wiesel, “Nobel Lecture: Hope, Despair and Memory,” (speech, Oslo, December 11, 1986), Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/lecture/>

<sup>369</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 86.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 90.

individual. As Wiesel put it: “Loss of faith for some equalled discovery of God for others.”<sup>372</sup> Many inmates did turn to extremes – be it absolute piety or total renunciation of faith. However, others oscillated between the two, and others put the topic out of their minds altogether.

### **God in Judaism - God in Auschwitz**

Jewish tradition speaks of God as the infinitely righteous, absolutely omnipotent Creator of all things and Author of history.<sup>373</sup> God was all-seeing and all-knowing; He punished people’s sins and rewarded their good deeds; He was a parent who judged fairly, loved His children and promised them His protection.<sup>374</sup> In Judaism, faith goes beyond the Western conception of belief in that God exists – Jewish faith denotes trust, reliability in God. It is based on the acknowledgement of a God who did not leave this world after Creation and is continually involved in the destinies of his creatures, and is concerned about man, who is of infinite value.<sup>375</sup> Judaic tradition teaches that God miraculously intervened to free the Jews from Egypt; He parted the Red Sea and led them to the Promised Land.<sup>376</sup> Indeed, the *Shekinah* always accompanies Israel through its exile. Because God cares deeply for man, men may turn to Him in prayer and He answers their call. God also speaks to man, and man can respond. Judaism is based on this mutuality of experience – through a revelation, there was an encounter between God and the Jewish people, establishing a covenantal relationship. Indeed, if one denies the covenant between God and Israel, taking away the encounter between God and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Judaism is greatly undermined.<sup>377</sup> Finally, since humanity’s existence is suffused by God’s divine presence, pious Jews understand the world to be ultimately and fundamentally meaningful.<sup>378</sup> Wiesel’s description of his faith before the Holocaust reflects these canons: “I existed to glorify God and to sanctify his word. ...I knew that God was at the same time near and far, magnanimous and severe, rigorous and merciful.”<sup>379</sup>

What prisoners saw and lived through in Auschwitz seemed to pose a radical counter-testimony to Judaism’s belief system, however. A survivor told Brenner: “We Jews of the Polish Jewish community lived with God as with an ever-available, always nearby Father

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<sup>372</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time* (New York: Avon, 1968), 20.

<sup>373</sup> Rubenstein and Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, 328.

<sup>374</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 144.

<sup>375</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 120.

<sup>376</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 144.

<sup>377</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 121.

<sup>378</sup> Roth and Berenbaum, ““Where is God Now?””, 261.

<sup>379</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 136-137.

who guided and sustained us, and upheld our faltering steps. Suddenly He was there no longer; we were utterly alone.”<sup>380</sup> The magnitude of the suffering and the apparent worthlessness of human life radically contradicted Judaism’s fundamental tenets of human value and divine concern.<sup>381</sup> As the pious and innocent were killed, it became increasingly difficult to speak of a God who was righteous, loving and merciful, as well as all-powerful.<sup>382</sup> The horror raised inescapable questions for religious Jews: if God is the ultimate Author of catastrophic events, was He using the Nazis as his agents to inflict terrible sufferings and death upon his people?<sup>383</sup> Or else, as Czech Jewess Margaret Schwartz wondered since her arrival to the camp: if God helped Jews in the past (parting the Red Sea), where was He now? Why doesn’t He help us?<sup>384</sup> Inside the camp, all seemed to be permitted – there were no limits of sacredness, no thunderbolts or divine curses, to stop the murder process.<sup>385</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the experience of Auschwitz made countless Jews re-examine their most fundamental beliefs, because in many ways, what they saw and went through contradicted what they had believed to be true. The faith of many underwent a deep crisis, but for others, their faith persisted, and in some cases intensified.

### **Faith maintained or enhanced**

Despite the challenges that Auschwitz posed to religious faith, many prisoners did manage to hold on to their beliefs with remarkable steadfastness. A Hasidic Jew interviewed by Brenner worked as a painter of the crematoria at Birkenau for thirteen months and witnessed the destruction of over 12,000 Jews, and he still related: “I always hoped that God would save me from the cannibals. I remained optimistic throughout and believed that I’d be freed.”<sup>386</sup>

Amidst all the death around them, some inmates gave their continuous survival a divine logic – their still being alive was either interpreted to be because God had a reason to keep them alive, or as a reward for their piety. In either case, their faith was reinforced. An example is Jacob Garfein, a Hungarian Jew who arrived in Auschwitz at age thirteen – the boy believed that a fellow Jew, who had saved him during the selection by telling a guard that Jacob was older and a prestigious mosaic artist, had been Elijah the Prophet, sent because of

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<sup>380</sup> Cited in Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 118.

<sup>381</sup> Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke,” 307.

<sup>382</sup> Roth and Berenbaum, ““Where is God Now?””, 261.

<sup>383</sup> Rubenstein and Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, 327.

<sup>384</sup> Cited in Eliach, *Hasidic Tales*, 140.

<sup>385</sup> Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke,” 334.

<sup>386</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 85.

his mother's prayers for her son.<sup>387</sup> A Hungarian Jewess even attributed a divine logic to the death of the innocent at Auschwitz:

Why did He first kill all the good people – the children, the old people, the religious people? Later I thought, maybe God wanted to kill them first to save them the pain. ...I didn't believe for a while, but I saw certain things happen to me so I thought God saved me for certain reasons.<sup>388</sup>

The belief that one had been chosen to be saved by God for a particular and meaningful purpose can be widely found in testimonies; it could do much to alleviate survivor's guilt, especially when the individual was aware their family had been killed.<sup>389</sup>

As it was discussed in the previous chapter, the extreme circumstances that prisoners found themselves in called for theological explanations, and those who remained faithful could have quite different understandings of their predicament. Some were largely shaped by the theodicies offered by the rabbis.

Some Jews in fact endured the experience by holding on to the conviction that God's ways are mysterious as finite man cannot understand His infinite ways. Their suffering was God's will; as such, it was to be accepted without hesitation or complaint, because God, in His perfect wisdom and goodness, knew best.<sup>390</sup> This maxim made allowed some religious Jews to affirm their faith while avoiding the agonizing implications of doing so (i.e. if God is omnipotent, He could stop the murder of Jewish children but doesn't).<sup>391</sup> This acquiescence stems from the very essence of Jewish faith, which consists of continuing to trust God even when one does not understand His ways and He seems to be violating his promise. Amidst the monstrosity, the Jew must stand firm in their covenant to God, because God and Israel are inextricably linked through a long, common history. As if saying to God: "I do not understand you. Your behaviour violates our covenant; still I trust you, because it is you, because it is you and me, because it is us." In this sense, trust does not negate reason, but it does overcome hurt.<sup>392</sup> An Auschwitz survivor interviewed by Brenner clearly held this stance:

I remained an observant Jew all my life and never questioned God's wisdom or God's actions. Man is an insignificant creature who is mortal, living only a brief span of years and then is gone. ...God is eternal and sees

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<sup>387</sup> Eliach, *Hasidic Tales*, 132-134.

<sup>388</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 152.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 218.

<sup>391</sup> Rubenstein and Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, 337.

<sup>392</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 124-125.

far into the future and back into the distant past. He sees all and knows all. It would be folly for man to imagine that he could begin to know God's purpose and God's plan for mankind. ...He doesn't owe man an accounting. ...When I was in Auschwitz, I prayed to God for deliverance but never blamed God for neglecting me or for being responsible for my presence there: Jews have faith in God; they do not judge Him.<sup>393</sup>

Not all Jewish prisoners were this fervently convinced by the assertion that God's ways are always wonderful and beyond man's comprehension. Some used it as a theological 'last resort', when all other explanations failed. In fact, for many believers, the notion was increasingly hard, and eventually impossible, to accept.<sup>394</sup>

On the other hand, a number of inmates, especially among the Orthodox, believed that their suffering at Auschwitz was God's punishment for the Jews. A Jewish inmate, whose daughter had been gassed, recalled approaching three praying men at Auschwitz and asked them how they could believe in God when the Nazis were murdering Jewish children. They replied, "Yes, we believe. We sinned. Jewishness is becoming less and less. Jews are marrying Gentiles. And that's why He's punishing us here."<sup>395</sup> This notion of divine retribution resonated with many inmates, even it was not explicitly acknowledged. After a girl in her barracks said her mother prepared the cholent (a traditional Jewish stew) with a pig's leg,<sup>396</sup> sixteen-year-old Ruth Brand says to her cousin, "She thinks she'll get out of here after a recipe like that?"<sup>397</sup> Brand's comment suggests that she also saw dying in Auschwitz as a sort of penalisation for having disobeyed God's law. The difference, however, is that while the three pious men interpreted Auschwitz as a collective punishment for all Jews, with the innocent children dying to hurt the sinful ("That's the biggest punishment for us."<sup>398</sup>), Brand apparently thought that each prisoner would be judged individually on their obedience to God, with their fate being set accordingly.

In stark contrast to the previous two theodicies, other Jewish inmates insisted that the torture and murder happening in Auschwitz were being perpetrated by man, not God. Accordingly, they rejected the notion that the current Jewish suffering was God's will. While the other theodicies saw the Germans primarily as instruments for God's purpose, this view considers them actors in their own right, and wholly place culpability upon them; thus,

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<sup>393</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 216.

<sup>394</sup> Schweid, "Justification for Religion," 396.

<sup>395</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 147.

<sup>396</sup> The *Kashrut* prohibits the consumption of pork.

<sup>397</sup> Brand, Interview 36328.

<sup>398</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 147.

exonerating God. This line of thinking, held mainly by non-Orthodox believers, is based on the principle that God does not determine a person's moral character because He gave man the freedom to choose.<sup>399</sup> God does not intercede in human affairs because He granted man a will of his own to do good or evil.<sup>400</sup> While God does have a special relationship with the Jewish people, some devout prisoners had little expectation that He would intervene to protect his people when evil men rose against them. A survivor spoke to Brenner of how, by subscribing to this understanding, his belief in God was unaffected by his time in Auschwitz:

The years that I endured the Nazi concentration camps had no connection whatever with my belief in God. The camps had nothing to do with God; and God...cannot be blamed for them. It never occurred to me to question God's doings or lack of doings while I was an inmate of Auschwitz ...I was no more or less religious because of what the Nazis did to us; and I believe my faith in God was not undermined in the least. It just never occurred to me to associate the calamity we were experiencing with God, to blame Him, or to believe in Him less or to cease believing in Him at all because He didn't come to our aid. God doesn't owe us that.<sup>401</sup>

This idea of God not playing a major role in the Holocaust is closely linked to the belief in a distant, impersonal God who is not concerned with man's activities. Some view God as a power or natural Force in the universe (*koach elyon*), removed and remote from man.<sup>402</sup> A survivor related to Brenner that he had always perceived God in this way:

Confined within the barbed wire of Auschwitz, I understood to separate the wicked deeds of men from the workings of the entire universe. ...I never believed God to be a kindly old man with a beard watching out for the welfare of each and every person. And within the workings of the world man can commit atrocities and murder or refrain from atrocities and murder. He is free to choose. ...God is not a puppeteer pulling the strings and making man dance. ...God doesn't act to stop murder and He doesn't, on the other hand, encourage murder. ...It has nothing to do with God, who is in no way like a man anyway.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>400</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 133.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 103.

While this prisoner had always believed in an impersonal God, several others transitioned from a belief in a very personal God to the idea of an impersonal one as their faith modified inside the camp. Brenner's research found that survivors who were religious before the Holocaust and whose faith underwent changes through the years were predominantly losing faith in a personal God during the Holocaust; and in the time after the Holocaust, they became believers in an impersonal God.<sup>404</sup> A Polish survivor reflected on how Auschwitz transformed one's concept of God's role in catastrophic events: "Before the Nazi campaign I may have felt at times that God was responsible for those obscene atrocities the world has known, but once I and my family and friends became victims of it, once we were involved personally and we knew we didn't deserve it, I never again felt that way."<sup>405</sup> Another survivor still believed that God was benevolent and omnipotent, but he now thought that God does not interfere where man's will prevails:

For a long time I thought that if God was good then He would take care of the good people – that God couldn't be good otherwise. But I also understand His plan in creating man was to give him dominion over this world to do good or bad. God is good but man can do as he sees fit. ...God lets man do what he will. He is good but does not constrain man's action.<sup>406</sup>

### *Where is God?*

A significant number of pious Jews, however, were ultimately unable to accept any theodicy to account for their present situation. This lack of an explicatory framework resulted in them having existential questions that raised great passions and led to strong accusations against God. For many, their trust in God was tempered by the sense of betrayal that the Father, the King of the Universe, had proved himself to be neither fatherly nor kingly enough.<sup>407</sup> Testimony shows that countless believers cried out to God unanswered, perhaps even knowing that their questions had no answers. Even those who accepted that what was happening was a punishment for their sins contended with God over the fate of innocent young children.<sup>408</sup> Nevertheless, according to Berkovits, the faith of the questioner most often remained intact despite Heaven's silence.<sup>409</sup> They could be angry at God, protest against Him,

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<sup>404</sup> Decades later, nearly 1 in 4 (24% - a rise from 14% during the Holocaust and from 16% immediately after the Holocaust) of the surveyed survivors believe in an impersonal God (defined as "a Force/Power in the universe.") See Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 94.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>407</sup> Raphael, *Female Face of God*, 25.

<sup>408</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 128.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 119.

even curse Him, but their cries expressed an unshakeable belief.<sup>410</sup> From a Jewish perspective, prayer is above all a dialogue; a prayer may be filled with anger, but the very fact that one prays implies someone is there to listen, that what is being said is not uttered to a great void.<sup>411</sup> Thus, to challenge God is still to preserve Him – in the words of Wiesel, “There comes a time when only those who do believe in God will cry out to him in wrath and anguish.”<sup>412</sup>

Yehiel De-Nur recalled a moment in which he cried out to God: “Who is the being within me, now delivered to the crematorium – and why? And who is the being within him, delivering me to the crematorium – and why?”<sup>413</sup> Likewise, as Jews gathered on the eve of *Rosh Hashanah*, Elie Wiesel asked angrily: “What does Your greatness mean, Lord of the Universe, in the face of all this weakness, this decomposition, and this decay? Why do You still trouble their [the gathered prisoners’] sick minds, their crippled bodies?”<sup>414</sup> Some, like Eugene Heimler, went further and even condemned God: “Almighty God, why have you done this to us? ...You are wicked O Lord, as wicked as man.”<sup>415</sup> Ana Vinocur, a Polish Jewess, would plead with God to help them: “O God! Wake up and see what they have done to the people who have always kept faith with you!”<sup>416</sup> On a barracks wall filled with inscriptions, Vinocur inscribes her petition: “I ask God to take into account all that is written here.”<sup>417</sup>

Also found in the camp were large numbers of believers who, in a desperate state, would curse God; threatening to withhold faith in Him – “God, if you don’t do something I am going to stop believing in you.” Nevertheless, the faith of these Jews appears to have remained robust. According to a survivor who worked in the gas chambers:

You’ve got to be very close to God, you have to know Him very well to blaspheme Him. Only a deeply religious person can despise God, shake his fist at God and abuse Him. A blaspheming Jew is a believing Jew. ...There were Jews who always tried to keep their heads covered when they ate, even if they only had the palm of their hand to serve as a skull cap. And they never took a gulp or bite without mumbling a prayer over the bread,

<sup>410</sup> Schweid, “Justification for Religion,” 404.

<sup>411</sup> Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness*, 80.

<sup>412</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 20.

<sup>413</sup> Ka-tzetnik 135633, *Shivitti*, 11.

<sup>414</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 84.

<sup>415</sup> Heimler, *Night of the Mist*, 30.

<sup>416</sup> Ana Vinocur, *A Book Without a Title*, trans. Valentine Isaac and Ricardo Iglesia (New York: Vantage, 1976), 66.

<sup>417</sup> Vinocur, *A Book*, 71.

regardless of how hungry they were. Moments earlier these same Jews were threatening God with denying His existence.<sup>418</sup>

Much of Wiesel's writing relates his journey with religious faith during his time in Auschwitz. He recalled that before the Holocaust: "It was once so simple ...if I questioned my belief at all, it was for fear that it might not be sufficiently perfect."<sup>419</sup> When Wiesel arrives in the camp as a young boy, his faith was still intact; this is evident from his reaction to being able to keep his new shoes upon arrival as the *kapo* didn't notice them because they were covered in mud – "I thanked God, in an improvised prayer, for having created mud in His infinite and wondrous universe."<sup>420</sup> However, his camp experience gradually makes Wiesel question his devotion to God: "Why, but why should I bless Him? In every fibre I rebelled. ...Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death?"<sup>421</sup>

It is noteworthy that Wiesel does not question God's existence, or even His power. In the previous passage, Wiesel challenges God, at least the image he previously had of Him; he even mocks God, by sarcastically phrasing his complaints in religious terminology, but he does not deny God. As he explained earlier on in the text: "I had ceased to pray ...I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice."<sup>422</sup> As Wiesel's pre-Auschwitz vision of God effectively crumbles, he becomes a clear example of those Jewish inmates who turned to challenging God: "I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused."<sup>423</sup>

It should be noted that the critical interrogation of God is not at all foreign to Jewish tradition; in fact, it constitutes an important part of the intimacy between God and the people of Israel. Berkovits explains that notwithstanding their trust in God, through the ages Jews have contended with Him, as if talking back to Him because of the unconvincing performance of the divine providence throughout history. They both trusted and questioned – their trust did not diminish their questioning, and their questioning did not weaken their trust. The very reality of the intimate relationship between covenant partners, not only allows, but, at times, requires the Jew to contend with the divine. It is actually quite conceivable that the

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<sup>418</sup> Cited in Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 100.

<sup>419</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 24.

<sup>420</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 56.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

more intimate the relationship between the individual and God, the greater the urge to question the ways of the divine partner.<sup>424</sup>

As many religious inmates struggled with a terrible sense of abandonment by God, some considered the possibility that God was simply absent from the realm of the camp. They considered that the state of things around them could only be possible if God was away on leave.<sup>425</sup> Speaking of God's total absence was more palatable than to declare, "God is dead" – although it was agonizing for prisoners to believe that He could intervene if He wished to but was not doing so.<sup>426</sup> Nonetheless, the idea that God was dead, emanating from the heart-wrenching aloneness they were experiencing, crossed the minds of some prisoners. Nowhere is this more evident than when Wiesel witnesses a young boy being hanged in front of thousands of prisoners; he hears someone behind him ask, "Where is God? ...Where is God now?" and a voice within Wiesel answers, "Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows."<sup>427</sup> Wiesel would later write, "He who kills, kills God."<sup>428</sup> Testimony shows that, utterly surrounded by death, this idea formed in the minds of many prisoners, including in that of the young Wiesel himself.

From another perspective, some prisoners came to fear that God had not simply been lost, but had in fact become an enemy. Wiesel explains how even Jewish teachings could be interpreted to lend credence to the notion that God abided in the executioner: "God is one; He is everywhere. And if He is everywhere, then He is in evil and injustice too, and also in the supreme evil: death."<sup>429</sup> Sara Zyskind, a Polish Jewess, confessed that when she gazed upon the "forlorn and stupefied women" around her, she thought to herself: "Perhaps God himself had begun to despise His own people."<sup>430</sup> Naturally, the prospect that God, neither absent nor dead, is present but has become an enemy who has come to hate the Jews, filled prisoners with terror.<sup>431</sup> He ceased being a God to whom one offered prayers, turning into a traitor to whom one shouts refusal.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, 126-128.

<sup>425</sup> Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, trans. H.A. Piehler (New York: Schocken, 1976), 14-15.

<sup>426</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, "Holocaust Survivor's Faith," 420.

<sup>427</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 83.

<sup>428</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1976), 58.

<sup>429</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Evil and Exile*, trans. Jon Rothschild (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 25.

<sup>430</sup> Sara Zyskind, *Stolen Years*, trans. Margarit Inbar (Minneapolis: Lerner, 1981), 195-196.

<sup>431</sup> Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1989), 250.

<sup>432</sup> Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness*, 80.

### *Faith ignored*

Some inmates did not experience a transformation of their religious faith simply because they did not give the matter any thought while they were incarcerated. Many survivors have reported that during their time in the camp, they were too busy with day-to-day survival, too exhausted from the 12-to-16 hour-long labour shifts to think about anything other than food at the end of the day; they did not ask themselves where God was, or what His role was in all of it, they simply did not think about it at all.<sup>433</sup> Brenner interviewed a survivor who had previously been very observant, but said that during the two years he spent in Auschwitz, he did not give religion much thought: “That’s not what I had on my mind. What I did think about, what kept me going, were dreams of what life could be, its pleasures: food, home, women, a bed, warmth, and cleanliness. These things and not religion kept me going.”<sup>434</sup>

Others made active efforts to keep the matter of God and divine responsibility from their minds. Bertha Ferderber-Salz, an Austrian Jewess who came from an Orthodox background, found that, in Auschwitz, she could not tolerate any theological reflection about the God who she felt was torturing her. Whenever questions entered her mind, she would scream out at God, “Leave me alone!”<sup>435</sup>

Even decades later, a significant number of survivors state that they do not permit themselves to think about the question of where God was during those dark times, as they would rather not have to consider God’s role in the destruction.<sup>436</sup>

### **Faith abandoned or denied**

A great number of prisoners found it ultimately impossible to reconcile what they were seeing and living through in Auschwitz, with their pre-camp religious beliefs. Often, in these cases, the individual’s system of religious beliefs collapsed. Wiesław Kielar, a Polish Jew who survived Auschwitz, expressed his thought process as follows: “If He existed – and it is in this belief that I was brought up – how could He allow these murders of helpless human beings, carried out by other human beings whose soldiers wore on the buckle of their belts the words ‘God is with us’?”<sup>437</sup> In fact, Brenner found that half of survivors who are non-

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<sup>433</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 144.

<sup>434</sup> Cited in Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 74.

<sup>435</sup> Bertha Ferderber-Salz, *And the Sun Kept Shining...* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1980), 194.

<sup>436</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 98.

<sup>437</sup> Wiesław Kielar, *Anus Mundi: 1,500 Days in Auschwitz-Birkenau*, trans. Susanne Flatauer (New York: Times Books, 1980), 177.

believers maintain that they arrived at their atheism because the Holocaust was irrefutable proof that there is no Providence in the universe.<sup>438</sup>

However, a crucial distinction must be made between those prisoners who intellectually concluded that God was non-existent, and those who denied Him as a result of feeling radically abandoned. Those in the former category made a conscious decision to reject and abandon their long-held system of belief. A Polish Jew from a Hasidic family, Yisrael Aviram related how this came to be the case of his father Yosef, who he had managed to remain with in Auschwitz. Yosef had been very pious and a fine scholar of the Talmud; during their time in the Lodz ghetto, he had responded to persecution with a revitalized adherence to religious observances. In the camp, Yosef continued teaching his son the Talmud during rest pauses, and on *Rosh Hashanah*, he served as the cantor because he knew the entire service by heart. Then, one night during the Ten Days of Repentance,<sup>439</sup> Yosef woke up his son who was sleeping in the bunk tier below and told him:

All my life I have believed in perfect faith in the omnipotent God of Israel. I have been convinced that He is omnipresent...and everything obeys His command...And so, He is also here in the valley of the shadow of death; and all that is done here, He has decreed from above. I have reached a conclusion:...either there is no God and all that I have been taught and have learned is a figment of the imagination and without foundation; or the other possibility is that there is a God and all this has occurred according to His will and due to Him. If so, this God is not my God. I do not desire Him; I shall not serve Him; I shall not turn to Him; and I shall not listen to His commands.<sup>440</sup>

Then, on *Kol Nidre* eve (the beginning of *Yom Kippur*), inmates from their block requested that he lead them in prayer, but Yosef refused: "Prayer? To whom? I, presently, am going to eat." Intending to break the fast as soon as it begun, Yosef swallowed a piece of bread which he had saved from the morning, albeit in obvious pain and sorrow. Yosef, whose entire being had been suffused with faith in God, came to reject Him, based on seeming the incongruence between his understanding of Judaism and his present situation.<sup>441</sup>

On the other hand, there were those who denied God's existence because they felt abandoned by Him, and chose to abandon Him in kind. Following this experience of

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<sup>438</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 118.

<sup>439</sup> The ten days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

<sup>440</sup> Cited in Landes, "Spiritual Responses," 261-262.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

abandonment in one's most critical hour of need is despair and hopelessness – the loss of trust in the world – as well as a deep rage directed at God.<sup>442</sup> These inmates expressed their feelings toward God by shouting His nonexistence to His face; by denying God's existence, they sought to punish Him. But in these cases, the boundary between belief and non-belief is significantly blurred – why shout at Him if He is not there? The divine is actually serving a punching bag which enables the inmate to ventilate their deep hurt and anger.<sup>443</sup> Yet God does not occupy the thoughts of those who have truly denied Him.<sup>444</sup> Indeed, Brenner's interviews revealed that many professing atheism were not genuine atheists – often denying a belief in God was actually an expression of a psychological need, an emotional device to “get back at God”, to “hurt” Him, to “punish” God for hiding His face at a time when His presence was desperately called for.<sup>445</sup> Inside the camp, many of those who claimed to have lost their faith were actually angry believers who refused to accept God's silence. This fact was not always overlooked by the inmates themselves – a Jewish poet from Poland revealed such awareness: “I call myself an atheist although I know deep in my heart that God exists. It is just that I refuse to give Him the satisfaction of acknowledging it.”<sup>446</sup>

Non-believing inmates had significantly varied reactions and attitudes towards the persistence of faith and religious practice of others around them.<sup>447</sup> Some saw the pious with admiration and, at times, even a degree of jealousy. Ludmila Page, a Romanian Jewess, related her feelings upon seeing two of her bunkmates praying *Shema Yisrael*, asking God to have mercy on them: “I thought what a wonderful thing is to have faith like this in the middle of this hell, to pray like they did.”<sup>448</sup>

To many other non-believers, the persistence of faith seemed incomprehensible. Müller expressed a sense of wonder and amazement towards Fischl's strong-held beliefs: “To me Fischl seemed a creature from another world, a world solely ruled and embodied by a God whom I sought in vain to comprehend in Auschwitz.”<sup>449</sup> For some, however, the idea of faith within the camp seemed so far-fetched that they approached it with incredulity. Shlomo Venezia spoke of his reaction towards pious Jews who praying to God in Birkenau: “I couldn't understand why they continued to call on him... What were they thinking? That

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<sup>442</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “Holocaust Survivor's Faith,” 420.

<sup>443</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 160.

<sup>444</sup> Schweid, “Justification for Religion,” 397.

<sup>445</sup> Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 100-101.

<sup>446</sup> Cited in Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 118.

<sup>447</sup> Non-believing inmates includes those who lost their faith during their time in Auschwitz, and those who arrived in Auschwitz without having religious faith to begin with.

<sup>448</sup> Ludmila Page, Interview 294 (*Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, 1994), accessed 22/04/19.

<sup>449</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 35.

*Adonai* was going to save them? What an idea! We were all living beings in the process of crossing the frontier into death!”<sup>450</sup>

Furthermore, some felt that the cruelty of Auschwitz meant that one could not talk of a loving and caring God without mocking the suffering around them.<sup>451</sup> This was the case for Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, who had always been committed to secular socialist policies rather than Judaism, and within Auschwitz, she found that Jewish faith “irritated” her in the face of “the unavenged murder of the whole Jewish people.”<sup>452</sup> Primo Levi articulated a similar view: “A prayer under those conditions would have been not only absurd but blasphemous. ...I rejected that temptation.”<sup>453</sup> He also expressed severe frustration and disapproval towards a bunk-mate praying after a selection:

I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud...thanking God because he has not been chosen. ...Kuhn is out of his senses... Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again? If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn’s prayer.<sup>454</sup>

#### *Faith lost and recovered*

The loss of faith inside Auschwitz was by no means a linear or permanent process. As David Patterson put it, religious inmates engaged with God “as one who is repeatedly, eternally, lost and recovered ...whose immortality and infinity lie in His capacity to be murdered an infinite number of times only to return time and time again, eternally.”<sup>455</sup> Indeed, the way in which testimony deals with faith reveals that certain moments and events in camp life tended to weaken faith, while others served to reinforce it.

The killing of children was perhaps a critical issue in leading inmates to question or lose their faith. Wiesel recalled how witnessing such a terrible crime in the woods in Birkenau gave him pervasive doubts about his beliefs: “I saw children being thrown into flames alive by the SS. ...Night after night, I kept asking myself, what does all this mean?”<sup>456</sup> In fact, this phenomenon makes much sense, since rabbinic tradition has long made a tight

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<sup>450</sup> Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 100.

<sup>451</sup> Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke,” 308.

<sup>452</sup> Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz*, 39.

<sup>453</sup> Levi, *The Drowned*, 145.

<sup>454</sup> Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 144-145.

<sup>455</sup> Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness*, 76.

<sup>456</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 182.

association between the presence of children and the presence of God in the world (*Shekinah*). Hence, in Judaism, the memory of the child is central to the memory of God; in the death of the child, one sees Him in the throes of death as well.<sup>457</sup> This notion is evidently clear in a previously cited passage where Elie Wiesel witnesses the hanging of a young boy, and declares that God is hanging along with him.<sup>458</sup> Indeed, many texts within Jewish liturgy attest to the importance of the child – for example, it is written that, “Rabbi Judah said: Come and see how beloved are the children by the Holy One, blessed be He.”<sup>459</sup> Wiesel further explains this explicit connection between God and children: “The death of a child is the death of innocence, the death of God in the heart of man.”<sup>460</sup> In fact, he states that, “It was as though the Nazis knew precisely what children represent to us. According to our tradition, the entire world subsists thanks to them.”<sup>461</sup>

For this reason, the death of children aroused in many believers a terrible fear and confusion. Livia Bitton-Jackson recalled her reaction: “Is it true, my dear God? Is it true that little children are trampled underfoot in the gas chambers? ...They told us. And I heard and screamed.”<sup>462</sup> It is an interesting fact that the survivors who report that learning about the fate of Jewish children shook their belief system are overwhelmingly female. A Jewess who survived Auschwitz as a child herself recalled witnessing the death of a baby, and having doubts creep in: “Was God watching this?”<sup>463</sup> She further explains how that episode had a lasting effect on her faith: “My belief might be stronger if I hadn’t seen those atrocities with my own eyes. What did a baby do to deserve his head smashed against a wall? Where was He at that time?”<sup>464</sup> Likewise, the Polish Jewess, Kitty Hart spoke of how her feelings towards God were altered upon listening to the screams of children being slaughtered: “You find it hard to believe that any faith in a benevolent God could be of value.”<sup>465</sup>

Male prisoners, on the other hand, apparently experienced a loss (or denial) of faith upon witnessing attacks on women. It is noteworthy that they rarely address such moments in their own testimonies; rather it is reported by onlookers. On Christmas Day of 1943, a large group of women in Birkenau were sent to the gas chambers after having been starved in their

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<sup>457</sup> Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness*, 83.

<sup>458</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 83.

<sup>459</sup> *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. VII, trans. and eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1961), 106.

<sup>460</sup> Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), 99.

<sup>461</sup> Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1978), 178-179.

<sup>462</sup> Livia Jackson, *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust* (New York: Times Books, 1980), 99.

<sup>463</sup> Cited in Hass, *The Aftermath*, 143.

<sup>464</sup> Cited in Hass, *The Aftermath*, 151.

<sup>465</sup> Kitty Hart, *Return to Auschwitz* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 156.

barracks over some days. Knowing they were being sent to their deaths, they tried to escape. Hearing the cries of the women, a rabbi's son called out: "God, show them your power – this is against you." When nothing happened and the women were finally massacred, the boy cried out: "There is no God."<sup>466</sup> Rudolf Vrba (born Walter Rosenberg), a Slovak Jew, described how a devout Auschwitz prisoner came to denounce God as well: "It is the will of God," he would mutter in the face of one horror after another. Then one day he was overwhelmed by the unworldly, anti-worldly screams of a group of women on their way to the gas chamber, "Moses Sonenschein murmured: 'There is no God...' Then his voice rose to a shout: 'There is no God! And if there is, curse Him, curse Him, curse Him!'"<sup>467</sup>

Conversely, certain instances acted as turning points in which inmates returned to their pre-Auschwitz beliefs and seemingly regained their faith, even if only fleetingly. This could happen unconsciously. For example, when Wiesel sees a young man abandon his father, he instinctively asked God for the strength never to do that – "In spite of myself, a prayer formed inside me, a prayer to this God in whom I no longer believed."<sup>468</sup> Many survivors reported witnessing reinvigorated bouts of religiosity among Jews immediately before they entered the gas chambers. Müller, who, working in the *Sonderkommando*, witnessed the final moments of countless groups of Jews, told of how many of the doomed would pray, "although they had not believed in God for a long time. Now, forsaken and with nothing left to cling to, they turned to God and prayed to him."<sup>469</sup> He described how the suspicion of what was to come would put victims "into a state of helpless submission to God's will."<sup>470</sup> From the moment of selection of those to be killed, "we could hear the sound of desperate wailing and lamenting, and of God being invoked."<sup>471</sup> Moreover, within the gas chamber, Müller described: "It was as though Judgement Day had come. We could clearly hear heart-rending weeping, cries for help, fervent prayers."<sup>472</sup> Many cried out the *Shema*; this affirmation of faith was often preceded by a last-minute exhortation by a rabbi or another religiously-inspired individual.

The renewal of the dialogue with God during a person's final moments was often triggered by desperation and terror; but as we have seen previously, this reconnection with the Jewish faith was also part of the act of *Kiddush Hashem*. It is noteworthy that this

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<sup>466</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *God and the Holocaust* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), 12.

<sup>467</sup> Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, *I Cannot Forgive* (New York: Bantam, 1964), 160-161.

<sup>468</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 109.

<sup>469</sup> Müller, *Auschwitz Inferno*, 74.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

phenomenon was present mostly prior to the death of those who were immediately sent to the gas chambers upon arrival; usually in the company of their families and fellow townspeople. On the other hand, the accounts of the death of those who had spent longer periods of time in the camp generally lacked this dignity and drama, as victims were too ill, exhausted, and weak. Many had already been physically and/or mentally broken by their ordeal; they met their deaths without their loved ones, without words of prayer gracing their final moments.<sup>473</sup>

### **The Impact of Religious Faith**

Inmates who fully turned their back on religion were relieved of the struggle and agony of coming to terms with God's apparent desertion; but they also lost the continuity and comfort which faith provides.<sup>474</sup> Indeed, a Godless world, infused with a sense of aloneness and emptiness, had its own perils.<sup>475</sup>

According to psychoanalysts Richard Ulman and Doris Brothers, trauma occurs when the meaning of an event changes a person's experience of themselves.<sup>476</sup> Psychology Professor Ronnie Janoff-Bulman introduced the theory that such trauma stems from the shattering of basic premises about the self and the world: that the world is benevolent, that it is meaningful, and that the self has worth.<sup>477</sup> By destroying the certainties that pattern mental life, trauma exposes its victims to experiences of unbearable uncertainty.<sup>478</sup> The concentration camp experience effectively destroyed what had seemed to the inmates to be self-evident assumptions about themselves and the world around them. Wiesel experienced this upon seeing children being thrown into flames: "I hear their cries turn into silence, and I no longer know anything: they have taken away my certainties, and no one will give them back to me."<sup>479</sup> Auschwitz had a severe impact on the symbolic world of each inmate – that is, the total system of beliefs, values, morals and knowledge which provide a framework of ultimate meaning for the individual. Life in the camp often radically challenged or entirely broke down the sense of ontological security that comes with such a framework. Moreover, when this fundamental order in terms of which the individual makes sense of their life is

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<sup>473</sup> Landes, "Spiritual Responses," 263.

<sup>474</sup> Hass, *The Aftermath*, 160.

<sup>475</sup> David Weiss and Michael Berenbaum, "The Holocaust and the Covenant", in *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, eds. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1989), 76.

<sup>476</sup> Ulman and Brothers, *Shattered Self*, 3-8.

<sup>477</sup> Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a new Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>478</sup> Doris Brothers, *Toward a Psychology of Uncertainty: Trauma-centred Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2008), x.

<sup>479</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 138.

undermined, a process of psychological disintegration and disorganization is generated.<sup>480</sup> Wiesel described how he experienced such a crisis of belief:

I felt like a stranger. I had lost my faith and thus, my sense of belonging and orientation. My faith in life was covered with ashes; my faith in humanity was laughable; my faith in God was shaken. Things and words had lost their meaning...Whom was I to lean on? What was I to cling to?<sup>481</sup>

Marcus and Rosenberg argue that religious experience has constructive, life-affirming properties which are generally underestimated. Religion formed a reservoir of meaning, a world of significance that nourished certain inmates while the outside world was attacking both their physical existence and psychological integrity.<sup>482</sup> Having a comprehensive system of meaning through which to organize one's ongoing experience seems to be an essential part of the experience of a stable sense of self.<sup>483</sup> Judaism, as a supporting self-object, could operate as a symbolic world (or framework of meaning), offering inmates a degree of understanding, predictability and safety. As such, it could strengthen the person of faith by preserving their self-cohesion, self-continuity, and self-esteem, helping them resist the extreme situation in which their selfhood and humanity are violently assaulted.<sup>484</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg describe an 'extreme situation' as one in which the individual is deprived of hope and finds and is at the mercy of destructive, irrational forces using him for their own goals. The individual feels totally helpless in the face of these mortal threats and powerless in relation to those in authority. There is a sense that the extreme situation will be inescapable and interminable. Individuals feel deprived of any positive, need-satisfying personal relationships. In an extreme situation, the 'background of safety' that develops and sustains the individual is gravely undermined.<sup>485</sup>

The individual must integrate depressive affect (like grief, sadness, pain, disillusionment) into the organization of their self-experience. Religion can provide a comprehensive explanation of human experience, allowing the individual to make their life intelligible by providing a coherent narrative – that is, through religion, man can root himself in a self-transcending mythic drama which supports their self-identity and self-esteem.<sup>486</sup> By linking their ordinary life to the fundamental order of the cosmos, the Jewish believer felt

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<sup>480</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, "Holocaust Survivor's Faith," 414.

<sup>481</sup> Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 142.

<sup>482</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, "The Value of Religion," 82.

<sup>483</sup> Barry Magid, "The Evil Self," *Dynamic Psychotherapy* 6, no. 2 (1988): 104.

<sup>484</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, "The Value of Religion," 82.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

connected to the calming and uplifting ideal reality of the divine. Judaism helped some inmates synthesise their discrepant experiences by providing a theodicy, which, as we have seen, allowed some to reconcile their belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God with the presence of suffering and evil in the world.<sup>487</sup> Theodicies interpreted experiences that threatened a person's existence (sickness, injury, death) as events within a larger, cosmic history; as a result, these sufferings were legitimated and awarded ultimate significance. In this way, a theodicy could allow the believer to carry on with life even after the death of a loved one, and to anticipate one's own death without being paralysed by the terror of it.<sup>488</sup>

This was the case of the father who refused to save his son from the gas chambers since he was unsure whether Judaism permitted him to do so – Rabbi Meisels recalled seeing the man soon after: “The whole day of *Rosh Hashanah* he walked about happy, repeating to himself that he had had the merit to offer his only son to God, although he had had a chance to redeem him. ...His attitude would be highly valued by God like the binding of Isaac which also took place on *Rosh Hashanah*.”<sup>489</sup> The man's attitude and acceptance to this otherwise earth-shattering event was rooted in his perception of God according to Jewish tradition. This example shows how theodicy helped the believing Jew to withstand negative or depressive feelings without falling into self-dissolution. According to sociologists Peter and Brigitte Berger, a theodicy can provide “ultimate meaning for human life, in its ability to integrate the painful and terrifying experiences of life or even death itself, into a comprehensive explanation of reality and human destiny.”<sup>490</sup> By allowing the inmate to preserve their symbolic world in the face of overwhelming suffering, religious beliefs provided them with a vital sense of self-continuity. In this sense, theodicies could be used by the believing inmate to self-soothe and self-comfort. Marcus and Rosenberg hold this made devout inmates somewhat able to experience themselves as a cohesive, harmonious, firm unit; staying connected to their past and meaningfully awaiting for the future.<sup>491</sup> Conversely, some other prisoners, when their religious beliefs no longer served them as an ordering framework, were left alone in dealing with the ubiquitous chaos, meaningless and death.<sup>492</sup>

The profound ontological need of humans to be rooted in a self-transcending power source (which may be grounded in a divine person/divine world), Marcus and Rosenberg suggested that any person, religious or otherwise, who had a well-organized symbolic world

<sup>487</sup> Peter Berger and Brigitte Berger, *Sociology: A Biographical Approach* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 352.

<sup>488</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 90.

<sup>489</sup> Cited in Landes, “Spiritual Responses,” 275.

<sup>490</sup> Berger and Berger, *Sociology*, 352.

<sup>491</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Value of Religion,” 100-101.

<sup>492</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, “The Holocaust Survivor's Faith,” 419.

to which they strongly adhered, may have been more likely to survive the camp experience than those without.<sup>493</sup> According to Bettelheim: “It is a well-known fact of the concentration camps that those who had strong religious and moral convictions managed life there much better than the rest. Their beliefs, including belief in an afterlife, gave them strength to endure which was far above that of most others.”<sup>494</sup> Many Auschwitz survivors made the observation that prisoners with strong convictions (religious or secular) often fared better in the camp. Jean Améry (born Hans Mayer), an Austrian-born Jewish writer, claimed that such inmates, survived better or died with more dignity than their irreligious or unpolitical intellectual comrades.<sup>495</sup> Likewise, Levi wrote: “Believers...endured the trials of the *Lager* and survived in a proportionately higher number. ...in the grind of everyday life, the believers lived better.”<sup>496</sup> Even during the imprisonment, there was a certain degree of awareness of this fact. For example, Wiesel witnessed the strong impact that losing faith had on a fellow prisoner called Akiba Drumer:

Lately, he had been wandering among us, his eyes glazed, telling everyone how weak he was: ‘I can’t go on...It’s over...’...He just kept repeating that it was all over for him, that he could no longer fight, he had no more strength, no more faith. ...Poor Akiba Drumer, if only he could have kept his faith in God, if only he could have considered this suffering as a divine test, he would not have been swept away by the selection. But as soon as he felt the first chinks in his faith, he lost all incentive to fight and opened the door to death. When the selection came, he was doomed from the start, offering his neck to the executioner, as it were.<sup>497</sup>

Elaine Seidenfeld, a Hungarian Jewess, spoke of how she interpreted a white line she saw in the sky as a sign from God that she would live. Upon returning home, she explained: “In order to survive you must believe in something, you need a source of inspiration, of courage, something bigger than yourself. Something to overcome reality. This line was my source of inspiration, my sign from heaven.”<sup>498</sup>

By placing their experiences within a meaningful context, individuals with religious faith or a political ideology (communists, Zionists) often resisted Nazi horrors than their

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid., 415.

<sup>494</sup> Bettelheim, *Surviving*, 296.

<sup>495</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 13-14.

<sup>496</sup> Levi, *The Drowned*, 145-146.

<sup>497</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, 95.

<sup>498</sup> Eliach, *Hasidic Tales*, 184.

secular or apolitical counterparts.<sup>499</sup> Faith could instil a psychological refuge, inside the self and within the community of believers, where one's identity as a person and as a Jew could not be degraded by German barbarism – faith allowed the self to resist the German assault at least spiritually.<sup>500</sup> The results of a psychological study carried out in Israel seemed to indicate that solid religious beliefs may have served as a protective factor to the long-term effects of trauma among Holocaust survivors over the subsequent decades.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> Robbin, "Life in the Camps," 239.

<sup>500</sup> Glass, *Jewish Resistance*, 104.

<sup>501</sup> Yuval Palgi, Amit Shrira and Menachem Ben-Ezra, "World Assumptions and Psychological Functioning among Ultraorthodox and Secular Holocaust Survivors," *Traumatology* 17, no. 1 (2001): 14.

## CONCLUSION

Within the barbed wire of Auschwitz, the lives of around one million Jews were lost; but Judaism itself was not. This thesis has found that religious observance and faith persisted there, which disproves the notion, postulated by theologians for decades, that the very existence of Auschwitz rendered life with God impossible. Many Jewish inmates found ways to live with God *in* Auschwitz – ways that were very diverse and often mutable. Perhaps the major finding of this investigation is the high level of nuances and variety of Jewish religiosity in Auschwitz. Then again, this should not come as a surprise – religious observance and faith are complex and incredibly personal matters.

Chapter 1 explored the persistence of religious practice – a fundamental pillar of Judaism – within Auschwitz. It found that, despite the camp's prohibition on all expressions of religious life, many Jewish inmates made great efforts to observe the *mitzvot* and carry out Jewish rituals and celebrations. The prominence of prayer in testimonies suggests that it was likely the most commonly performed *mitzvah*. This makes sense because, according to Judaic tradition, only prayer sustains the direct relationship between the Jew and God; and we know that many inmates were desperately seeking God during their time in the camp. Other *mitzvot* like those regarding dietary laws and religious education also continued to be observed, through great efforts, and to different degrees.

The chapter also found that female Jewish prisoners observed religion quite differently from their male counterparts – whereas Jewish men mostly dealt with their relationship and obligations to God, women focused on the Jewish principles regulating relations between human beings. Based on the inherently Jewish value of *hesed*, they prioritized comforting and caring for one another. The testimonies of female survivors suggest that this behaviour (along with their attempts to cleanse themselves) was driven not only by pragmatism, but a conscious retention of Jewishness. It seems possible that this recreation of 'families' and the social networks established by female prisoners could increase their chances of survival – but this must remain speculation, as no statistics on the female/men death rate are available.<sup>502</sup>

Furthermore, this research found that great importance was awarded by many inmates to the celebration of Jewish Holy Days – although they often had to be adapted and required great resourcefulness. Often the availability of ritual objects determined the character of these celebrations. Jewish inmates demonstrated significant creativity and ingeniousness in making

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<sup>502</sup> Ringelheim, "Women," 747.

do with what little was available. These festivities, as well as the religious objects, connected the Jews to their pre-traumatic identities, reminded them of their past homes and families, and, at times, offered them a bit of normality and continuity within the chaos of Auschwitz.

Some Holy Days and religious festivals actually acquired a new, greater significance by the degree to which they mirrored the prisoners' present reality. For example, Jewish inmates were not only celebrating Judgement Day, they had a sense that they were *living* it. This closely linked to the theodicy claiming that Jews are always taking part of a divinely-ordained history, with God continuously testing their faith. Testimony suggests that this notion, promoted by certain rabbis, fuelled the desire of many Jewish inmates to prove themselves to God by following his commandments. The value of religious observance is reflected in the fact that, despite the added risk and self-denial it entailed, it was not only a minority of ultra-Orthodox or rabbinical figures who engaged in it. On the contrary, non-religious Jews and even Jewish children were often also drawn to ritual observance.

This chapter also explored what motivated Jews in all of this. Even before the Holocaust, an individual's reasons to practice Judaism were not always tied to religious belief.<sup>503</sup> However, the way in which observance enabled the inmates reconnect with their pre-traumatic identities gained immense value and it was this that drew many to religious practice. Testimony also conveys that many Jews continued, or even enhanced, their observance because they saw it as way to challenge the Nazi design to degrade and ultimately eradicate Judaism. Depriving traditional Jews of the opportunity to maintain their religious observance was a key aspect of the Nazi assault on prisoners' identity; therefore, its impact on their well-being should not be underestimated. This chapter found that Jewish prisoners felt a deep need to keep their past and present identities together; and for many, religious observance helped in this effort. By linking them to their pasts and loved ones, as well as granting them a sense of temporal continuity and a degree of momentary bodily autonomy, religious practice buttressed the prisoner's sense of their own humanity and selfhood. Of course, we cannot possibly know whether this mental strength improved their chances of survival, but it does seem that in some cases it, transformed into physical resilience.

Chapter 2 explored the role of rabbis in Auschwitz. Rabbis saw it as their duty to offer spiritual guidance and buttress the faith of their followers during those times of suffering. While post-Holocaust survivor testimony almost always speaks of rabbis as praise-worthy

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<sup>503</sup> Brenner found that while European Jewry before the Holocaust was religiously observant – with 55% keeping at least six religious practices – they were not a particularly or intensely God-believing collective – with only 69% reporting that they believed in God before the Holocaust. See Brenner, *Faith and Doubt*, 91.

examples of unshakeable religious faith and courage, they also convey that rabbis were often ardently challenged by Jewish prisoners. While testimony speaks of some rabbis who did come to doubt their faith, this chapter found that the majority of rabbis continued to adhere closely to the Jewish faith.

This investigation also found that rabbis played an important role in promoting religious practices among fellow Jewish inmates: encouraging them to pray and study the sacred texts. Moreover, rabbis did much in helping inmates navigate camp life in as much harmony as possible with the principles of Judaism by ruling on *halakhic* questions. This was extremely significant considering the stay in Auschwitz presented prisoners with previously unimaginable dilemmas, and rabbinical guidance allowed them to deal with these through a meaningful framework. Probably the most crucial role of rabbis was providing theological explanations to prisoners who were increasingly coming to doubt Jewish tradition, which, in turn, threatened their sense of ontological security. By speaking of Auschwitz as a great test of faith, or an appropriate divine punishment, rabbis could offer at least some inmates answers to the questions torturing their minds. By placing their current experiences within the grand narrative of Israel's travails and exile, rabbis placed divine meaning on the suffering of Jewish inmates. This could offer great value in sustaining Jews emotionally, particularly in moments of impending death. However, there was only so much rabbis could do. There were significant limitations to their theodicies, and ultimately, many prisoners harshly rejected the rabbinical attitudes and discourses. Chapter 2 also found that many ordinary Jews took on rabbinical roles in promoting religious faith and practice among other prisoners.

Chapter 3 dealt with the issue of religious belief inside the camp. While many later theologians have asked how faith could be possible after Auschwitz, this chapter essentially explored how faith was possible *during* Auschwitz. It found that a great number of Jews maintained their faith, and some even enhanced its intensity; often attributing divine logic to their continued survival. They held varying understandings of the events – which allowed them to reconcile them with their belief system. Testimony shows that many indeed subscribed to the theodicies given by rabbis, that they had to trust God's incomprehensible ways and had to continue proving their faith to Him. Still, others, especially among the ultra-Orthodox, saw Auschwitz as an appropriate punishment sent by God for the Jews for having strayed from religious tradition during the past few decades. On the other hand, other Jewish inmates believed that the mass murder was neither God's will nor His doing; their faith in Him could remain intact.

Many inmates questioned and challenged God, often with deep anger, desperately demanding explanations of Him. Yet this is actually in accordance with Judaic tradition, which is one of dialogue and a mutual agreement. A close look at the testimonies indicates that the inmates who took part in such intense interrogation remained believers nonetheless. This chapter also found that in dealing with a painful sense of abandonment, several prisoners came to think that God was absent from Auschwitz, or, even more daunting, that God was actually present but had turned into an enemy of the Jewish people. On the other hand, it appears that many Jews ignored the issue of faith altogether, because they were focused on other things, or because they found it better to consciously keep it out of mind.

As for Jewish inmates who abandoned or denied their faith during their time in Auschwitz, it was found that an important categorical distinction must be made between Jews who intellectually concluded that what they witnessed in Auschwitz invalidated the possibility of God's existence, and those who chose to deny or renounce God out of a deep-rooted sense of abandonment. All those who struggled with their faith had quite diverse attitudes toward the religiosity of other inmates – from admiration, to irritation, to utter confusion.

An important finding of this chapter is that the loss and recovery of faith were continuous, non-linear processes, often triggered by particular situations or events. Witnessing the killing of children in particular, caused a crisis of faith for many Jews, given the importance of the child within Judaic tradition. Conversely, it was found that a sense of impending death – especially during the moments prior to entering the gas chambers – often led to bouts of faith among the doomed. Those who were about to be gassed could leave no testimony of their own, but onlooker testimony suggests that they returned to God in those final moments.

Finally, this chapter found that faith could have life-sustaining value by providing the inmate with a comprehensive framework of meaning through which to organize and understand their experiences. This helped them avoid falling prey to the chaos and uncertainty of camp life, by preserving their self-identity, self-cohesion, and self-continuity. Many testimonies suggest that belief and convictions, religious or not, helped inmates endure the reality of Auschwitz better than those who lacked them. While there is no way to prove a relation between religiosity and mortality, it does seem that maintaining faith may have improved an inmate's chances of survival by contributing to their mental well-being and, consequently, their self-preservation.

Overall, Auschwitz did more to undermine the faith of its prisoners than to buttress it. But this research has shown that religion, which is a complex and nuanced matter under normal circumstances, became even more so within Auschwitz.

This investigation has looked at Judaism in Auschwitz; this could also be done with a focus on other specific Nazi camps, ghettos, or Jewish communities in a specific locality. Moreover, it could really add to existing theological and historical literature to compare religious observance and faith among Jews in different ghettos/camps or places; as well as religious change among those who experienced the Nazi concentration and death camps and those who never did; or among those who experienced different types of camps, or spent different lengths of time incarcerated. Overall, more specific and comparative approaches could make valuable additions and developments around the topic of religion during the Holocaust.

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