

Prayer in a World of Destruction

Group 1

Holocaust survivor Zvi Barlev was born in Krakow, Poland. A few months after he reached bar mitzvah, Krakow was conquered by Germany and Zvi and his family were imprisoned in the ghetto. In his memoirs, Zvi describes an event that occurred just prior to the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto, when the family did not know what fate awaited them.

My mother had already packed everything – knapsacks were ready and everyone had two more packages to carry as well. We would be leaving carrying everything we owned, and we'd be dressed in our finest clothing.

*“Come,” says father, “let us say our last tefillot in the ghetto; for maariv [evening prayer] we will already be somewhere else.
”He wraps himself in his talit, covers his head and murmurs quietly, “How precious is Your faithful care, O God! Mankind shelters in the shadow of Your wings... With You is the fountain of life; by Your light do we see light”...
Father’s head is still in the talit – and he is weeping.
I try to keep from crying, but I cannot hold myself back. I turn my head away so that my parents won’t see. I pray with all my heart, “Happy are we! How goodly is our portion, and how pleasant is our lot, and how beautiful our heritage” – and I cannot continue... I understand the meaning of the words and they sound absurd. Is it not hypocritical to say the words of tefillah that have no truth, am I not violating the commandment of loose-tonguedness? I wanted to put my siddur [prayer book] down, but it was clear to me that I would hurt my father, and he was suffering enough as it was. After all, he understands the words in the siddur too – and he is praying...*

*Zvi Barlev (Bleicher), Would God It Were Night (Heb.)
(Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim Publishing Group, 1981), pp. 85-86.*

What is striking in Zvi's description is the tension between the words of the tefillah that are so difficult for him to say under the circumstances, and the obligation he feels toward his father.

Holocaust survivor David Kahane was a rabbi in a Lvov synagogue before WWII broke out. He was imprisoned in the Lvov ghetto during the Holocaust. With the help of Archbishop Andrei Sheptytskyi, he found haven in a monastery. In his diary, David describes the following:

Meanwhile, September was drawing to a close. The bloody [Jewish] year 5703 [1942-1943] was about to end.

On Saturday night, September 1943, Jews in the free world were probably getting ready to recite Selichot [penitential prayers recited in the period leading up to Rosh Hashanah].

The first day of the New Year fell on Tuesday, September 30, and Yom Kippur was due on October 9. Since I kept an accurate account of holy days and festivals, I was able to commune in my thoughts with the community of Israel. No holy place, no public prayer, no prayer book, and no Jews. I was alone, set apart and cast out. I spent the Days of Awe [the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur] in the very heart of the Uniate Catholic church. "From the depths I call on thee, O Lord!" With these words I poured out my heart before the Eternal G-d.

*David Kahane, Lvov Ghetto Diary
(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), p. 143*

David Kahane was born in 1903 in Grzymalow, Poland (Galicia, today Ukraine). He was ordained as a rabbi in 1929 and served in Lvov. After the war, he was involved in the rebuilding of Jewish communities in Poland in his capacity as Chairman of the Vaad Hakehilot (Community Committee). He also served as Chairman of the Council of Rabbis and was Chief Rabbi of the Polish Army. He immigrated to Israel and served as a military chaplain.

For Rabbi Kahane, tefillah was not only an internal dialogue with God but way beyond that. It helped mitigate the deep-seated sense of loneliness he felt and linked him to a sense of belonging to the klal (community).

Betty Meir arrived with her mother from the Westerbork transit camp in Holland to Bergen-Belsen. Trained as a nurse, she worked in the camp hospital in order to be able to help her mother.

One of my assignments was to look each morning to see who had died during the night [...] In the morning, a driver with a cart and donkey would arrive, and the two of us would lift the bodies onto the cart. I would become particularly shaken up if someone I knew was among them, that was terrible [...]

One night, I broke down completely. I was in the nurses' office and I cried terribly. Although I am not religiously observant, I said, "G-d, what have I had so far from life? I haven't yet lived, I haven't yet had anything. I went to school, I studied nursing for a few years, what have I had and today I am going to die? I haven't even done anything." I pleaded that He keep me alive.

From where will my help come?

Betty did not define her conversation with God as prayer.

This would be a good opportunity to discuss with the students the question of what tefillah actually is.