

# Prayer in a World of Destruction

## Group 2

Holocaust survivor Reuven Feldschuh was an active Zionist rabbi and educator. While imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto he kept a diary, in Hebrew, in which he described the following:

*The kloyz [synagogue] is nearly full. The chazzan's [cantor's] modulated tefillah is melodious. An outsider observer of the ba'al tefillah [lit. leader of the prayers, the cantor] and the mitpalelim (worshippers) would not discern that the world is about to fall into an abyss.*

*They all don their talit and tefillin [phylacteries]. If you close your eyes for a moment and do not look at these people, at their gaunt faces... and listen only to the hum of their prayers, you would be sure you happened upon the synagogue at a time of peace and tranquility...*

*Young people are also in the camp of mitpalelim, and their numbers are not few. They, too, are partners to the formation of a mood in which the corporeal is forgotten and the neshama [soul] is surrendered to exalted, supreme worship, in which the dwindling of the body takes no part, and the suffering of the moment is considered naught...*

*I was suddenly filled with a warmth the likes of which I had not felt throughout the war. Someone, or something, had carried me from here, borne me, and planted me amidst the Jews from the Middle Ages, who were fighting and dying for their faith... Out in the world -- murder, theft, robbery, fraud. Out on the street – cold. In the heart – grief and pain. But above all these hovers another force, supreme and eternal. The force of the generations that have been and that will be.*

*Reuven Feldschuh, Yad Vashem Archives 033/959, p. 644*



Felschuh's words articulate the disparity between reality and mood, and the gap in time between the present and the distant past, from which he draws strength and meaning. This association with the harsh periods of Jewish history may just as well have weakened him, dragging him down; yet instead – it is this link between the past and the present that gives him strength.

Holocaust survivor Imre Kertesz was born in Hungary. At the age of 15, he was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and later to Buchenwald. In his memoirs, Imre describes an event that took place in the camp when a young boy was hanged before the camp prisoners.

*My attention was drawn rather to my left, from where all at once came a sound, a muttering, some sort of song. In the row, I saw a slightly tremulous head on a scraggly, forward-stretched neck... the rabbi. Soon I also picked out his words, particularly after others in the row had slowly taken them up from him... it somehow it passed across to nearby groups, the other blocks, spreading and gaining ground as it were, because there, too, I observed a growing number of lips in motion and shoulders, necks, and heads cautiously, almost imperceptibly, yet distinctly rocking back and forth... 'Yitgaddal ve-yitkaddash' being sounded over and over again, like some murmur issuing from the ground below, and even I knew that this was the so-called Kaddish, the Jews' prayer of mourning for the dead... Indeed, for the very first time, I, too, was now seized, I don't know why, by a certain sense of loss, even a touch of envy; for the first time, I now somewhat regretted that I was unable to pray, if only a few sentences, in the language of the Jews.*

*Imre Kertesz, Fatelessness (Vintage International, New York, 2004), pp. 161-162.*