

Prayer in a World of Destruction

Group 4

Korets (Poland, now Ukraine) was captured by the Germans in the summer of 1941. In the *aktionen* that took place in the summer of 1941 and spring of 1942, more than 2,600 Jews were murdered, leaving only about 1,000 Jews in the ghetto.

On Rosh Hashanah of 1942, the Jews prayed at the Shoemakers' Synagogue. It was the only synagogue remaining standing [...] I will never forget those two days of Rosh Hashanah. The tefillot were accompanied by the heart-rending weeping of men and women. All the Jews of the ghetto were present. Even the secular Jews prayed with great kavana [fervor]. Everyone felt that the only help that could be expected would be help from God. The most difficult moments were in the reciting of the kaddish. All the mitpalelim [worshippers] recited the kaddish in unison; there was no one present who did not have someone to say the kaddish for.

From The Book of Korets, Korets Landsmanshaft in Israel, p. 71.

Reciting the *kaddish* here is an expression of continuity and of clinging to tradition, but it is also an articulation of the great rupture taking place.

Holocaust survivor Rabbi Naftali Stern served as the chief *chazzan* in the city of Satmar for many years. With the German occupation, he was deported to Auschwitz with his entire family. After the *selektion* he was sent to forced labor in the camp at Wolfsberg. As Rosh Hashanah approached, he realized that the texts of the *tefillot* were not readily available. Somehow, in exchange for valuable bread rations, he managed to obtain a torn wrapping from a sack of cement. He quickly jotted down the words of the *tefillot* on them from memory, just one week before the holy day.

I wrote this from memory in an effort to make as few mistakes as possible, because I remember the prayers as a ba'al tefillah who prayed for many years... For forty-three years the handwritten machzor [High Holyday prayer book] was in the machzor I prayed from after the war. On Rosh Hashanah, I would take it out and place it before me. I know that it has already begun to disintegrate, because I wrote it in pencil on the paper from a sack of brown cement I bought in exchange for bread rations."

Naftali Stern kept the pages of *Mussaf* [additional prayer recited on Shabbat and holidays] of Rosh Hashanah from the camp in Wolfsberg in his home, keeping it among the family's *machzorim* [holiday prayer books]. Every Rosh Hashanah he would spread out those pages and pray from them. When he decided to hand over them over to Yad Vashem for perpetuity, he burst into tears, kissing them and saying, "I made the utmost effort to safeguard these, I didn't know then in the camps that what was written would become a national treasure... with God-s help I will read from it every Rosh Hashanah. I will come here during the holidays to see it." Naftali Stern passed away on 24 Av 5749 (25 August 1989).

At the end of Yom Kippur, 1944, Naphtali Stern wrote the following in the camp at Wolfsberg:

"Sovereign of the world!

You wrote in Your holy Torah [about Yom Kippur], "and you shall torment your souls" [meaning to fast completely during Yom Kippur] and in another place You wrote, "and you shall safeguard your souls."

Lord my Creator and my sanctity!

Which of the two should I observe – if I continue my fast it will be my end, and then I will not be able observe the second commandment – what should I do?

I want to fast and You don't let me, You don't let me, and in spite of that I will fast, this time I will fight You!

You don't let me fast and I will fast anyway, I believe that I will beat You but give me the strength to beat You."

The above words actually came out of my mouth and suddenly a heavy sigh burst out of my throat from the depths of my soul. Neither before nor since have I ever felt such a feeling.

I immediately felt the answer of the Holy One, blessed be He. I felt enormous relief. My hunger ended. New strength came into me, and I continued with both together – work for the Germans and prayer to the Holy One, blessed be He.

The afternoon hours passed easily for me. I also managed to pray Minchah [the afternoon prayer] and Ne'ila [the closing service on Yom Kippur] (however much I still knew by heart) and in that way, seven o'clock in the evening arrived; by this time, Yom Kippur had already ended.

We finished our work and began to march seven kilometers to the camp.

I didn't see three stars in the sky [the way by which a Jew marks the end of a day], but rather three million. I added another hour of fasting as a sacrifice of thanks to the Holy One because of the great kindness He had done me.

Only an hour later, did I take out the dry bread and the herring tail and eat.

There is a great rule among us Jews: "He who trusts in God will be surrounded by His mercy." _