

Prayer in a World of Destruction

Group 6

Holocaust survivor Avraham Lidovsky from Baranowichi fled the ghetto and joined a partisan unit. He described his experiences in his diary:

We were twenty-four Jews together, nineteen young men and five young women, with seventeen rifles and grenades among us. Our ashen hut was hidden in the shadows of a dense wood of pine trees, deep in a thick shady forest. [...] A dull yellow light glows through the curtain hung across the small window, from the small gloomy flame burning inside the hut. The small iron heater is burning, hot as fire, to the sounds of the Jewish melodies and folk songs. We are seated on ledges, everyone in their own position; one has his legs folded under him, another leans on his hand... Quiet, heartfelt melodies pour forth from our throats. Lazar conducts the chorus.

“Comrades, it is Erev Shabbat, let us now sing Avinu Malkeinu [a prayer said on the High Holidays, here used in irony as Shabbat is normally a time of joy].”

All immediately begin singing Avinu Malkeinu. The Jewish melodies break forth until the early hours, echoing among the great branches of the trees; it almost seemed as if the people wished for the trees to join us in song.

From time to time, the sentry would come in to remark, “Lower your voices, comrades.” We sing with such passion that for a short while we forget that we are in the forest; it seems to us that we are sitting in our homes around the table on Friday evening, singing zmirot, as in days gone by.

Avraham Lidovsky, In the Forests: Notes of a Jewish Partisan (Heb.) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1946), pp. 134-135.

The following prayer was composed at Bergen-Belsen. *Pesach* [Passover] 1944 was approaching, and the rabbis in the camp were grappling with the difficult issue of *issur chametz* [the prohibition of eating leavened foods on Passover]. On one hand, the eating of *chametz* is prohibited on *Pesach*, but how could they possibly issue an injunction against eating *chametz* given the poor physical condition the Jews were in? Due to the dire circumstances, Rabbi Salomon Levinson composed the following *tefillah* with a heavy heart.

Before eating chametz, one should say with meaning:

“Father in heaven, it is revealed before You that our will is to do Your will, and to celebrate Passover by eating matzah [unleavened bread] and by abstaining from eating chametz. Alas, our hearts are filled with anguish, for our servitude prevents us [from fulfilling these commandments], and we find ourselves in mortal danger. We are ready and willing to fulfill Your commandment to “live by them” (Leviticus 18:5) – and not to die by them – and also to obey the warning, “Take heed to yourself and guard yourselves well.” Therefore, we beseech You to grant us life, sustain us and speedily redeem us, that we may observe Your commandments, do Your Will and serve You wholeheartedly. Amen.”

Yona Emanuel, Dignity to Survive (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, 1998), p. 178.

Moshe Ha-Elion and his family were deported to Auschwitz from Thessaloniki, Greece. In his memoirs, he describes his Yom Kippur in the camp's infirmary.

The eve of the Day of Atonement came [...] Against the day of fasting I had saved, every day in the week that preceded it, a little part of my daily bread portion [...]

...suddenly the door of our hall was shut and a sentry was posted [...] A lockdown was imposed on the whole camp! [...] We knew! This was it! The moment we had feared would come had arrived! [...]

The reading of the numbers began and continued for a long time. The person whose number was read, left his bed, took his effects...and went to one corner of the hall [...]

Words can hardly describe the atmosphere permeating the hall, a mixture of tension, expectation, shock and fear. The people remained silent as if they were holding their breath [...]

*The SS men left, taking with them those whose fate had been determined [...]
Long minutes after the whole affair had ended I remained standing by my bed bewildered, stunned, finding it difficult to realize that I had escaped from the worst fate of all [...]*

Meanwhile it darkened; the Eve of the Day of Atonement had come [...] I returned to my bed determined now with greater vigor to persist in my fast [...]

Towards the end of the day of fasting, at the time of Ne'ilah (the closing service) I felt an inner impulse, impossible to stop, to raise my voice and to sing the liturgical hymn, which was always sung with a great emotion and an inestimable devoutness by the congregation. It was the hymn "El Nora Alila" (Oh God, Who Acts Awesomely.) A part of its stanza with words inspiring hope seemed fit to be said at that time more than ever in the past [...]

...Favour them and take pity,

And every oppressor and warrior

Give them the punishment

In the time of the Ne'ilah

[...]

Michael the Minister of Israel

Eliyahu and Gabriel,

Please herald the redemption,

In the time of the Ne'ilah

*Moshe Ha-Elion, The Straits of Hell: The Chronicle of a Salonikan Jew in the Nazi Extermination camps
Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Melk, Ebensee (Cincinnati: Bowman & Cody Academic Publishing, Inc. &
Bibliopolis, 2005) pp 29-31*