

# HOLOCAUST:

## RESISTANCE, RESCUE AND SURVIVAL

### Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust

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Grenades, explosions and revolts tend to be noticed. Spiritual forms of resistance are subtle and not easily seen. The way a person thinks, their small acts of devotion and the respectful ways they treat other inmates, exemplify heroic spiritual resistance. How do you wake up day after freezing day to slave labor? Is it possible to have any spirit left in you? Is it possible to retain any iota of religious commitment? Writings from the Holocaust have shown us that, indeed, even during the most horrific of human conditions, spiritual resistance is possible.

Being a practicing Jew involves the adherence to a tremendous amount of rituals and practices. For example, a Jew who is committed to following traditional Jewish law must eat only kosher food, and pray three times a day. When life is routine, observing all the laws is a challenge. It is almost unimaginable to picture people concerned with their religious practices even in situations where survival depends on the next morsel of bread.

Jews lit teaspoons of oil on Chanukah in menorahs made of potatoes, they hid passages of holy texts on their body to study secretly, and they died with the words of the prayer the Shema on their lips — Hear O Israel the Lord you God the Lord is One. All of these acts put their lives at risk.

Rabbi Ephraim Oshry lived in the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania during the years of the Holocaust. There he served as spiritual leader. Many Jews came to him with both religious and practical questions as they struggled to live in the ghetto. Rabbi Oshry wrote down hundreds of these questions and their answers on scraps of paper that he buried and retrieved after the war. Questions arose regarding eating food that is not kosher, about when to say prayers, endangering other peoples' lives in order to save oneself, and what to do with holy objects such as prayer books.



#### Silk "Tallit" (prayer shawl) bag

Marian Z. and his family were deported from the Lodz Ghetto in 1944. Just before the deportation, he stuffed several photos in his Tallit bag and hid it under the floorboards. After liberation in 1945, Mr. Z. returned to the remains of the ghetto and uncovered the Tallit bag, its contents still intact. (On display at the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center)

Jews enslaved in the Kovno Ghetto worked in brutal conditions with little food and no pay, and yet many continued to pray everyday. In the regular daily prayers it is customary to thank God for being alive and well and free. A question emerged:

One morning during prayer, Reb Avrohom Yosef, who was leading the morning service, reached the blessing, "Blessed are You God Ruler of the universe who has not made me a slave." He shouted bitterly ... "How can I recite the blessing of a free person?"

This question was brought to Rabbi Oshry. He explained — a human being's freedom goes beyond the physical. One can be enslaved physically but be free spiritually. "I therefore rule that we must not skip or alter this blessing under any circumstances. On the contrary, despite our physical captivity, we are obligated more than ever to recite this blessing to show our enemies that as a people we are spiritually free."

This question goes to the heart of spiritual resistance. Praying through years of

subjugation is hard to believe. Caring enough about the words and nuances to ask the rabbi is even more difficult to imagine. Imagine hearing this response from the rabbi and visualize being a broken slave hearing that though your body is controlled your soul can't ever be enslaved. That belief is behind every act of spiritual resistance.

# activities

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1. In a democracy, freedom comes in many forms — speech, religion, voting, education, thought, etc. How does the newspaper represent our freedom? Look through today's Seattle Times and identify how it demonstrates our freedom. Pay close attention to the opinion/editorial section. How does this section support the idea of spiritual freedom as discussed in today's Studying the Holocaust article?
2. Do you believe that one can be physically enslaved but mentally, spiritually and emotionally free? Why or why not? How can humans maintain the other types of freedom while physically not free? What does this say about the importance of our physical surroundings?
3. Today we learned that the Jewish religion involves a lot of rules. Why do cultures have rules? And what are the rules in our own nation/culture. Look for images and articles of people who demonstrate the rules of our nation/culture.

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