

בס"ד

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## ***A Yom Kippur Appeal to a Hated KAPO***

### **Rabbi Yisroel Spira, the fourth Bluzhover**

**Rebbe**, was a beam of spiritual light in the dark evil of the Nazi concentration camps. This episode took place in the Yanovsky labor camp in Lemberg, a few days before *Yom Kippur*. There, as in all the ghettos and camps, the Nazis appointed Jews to supervise the laborers and extract from them the last particle of endurance and strength. The chief *Kapo* (work supervisor) in Lemberg was a Jew named Schneeweiss.



Like many Jews in his position, his fawning desire to please his masters in return for an extra portion of bread or an extra day of life often made him seem even more cruel than they. The Nazis, in turn, enjoyed the spectacle of Jew persecuting Jew.

Now, Yom Kippur was on the way. Fasting could be managed, although it would mean placing oneself in mortal danger. Food rations were below the subsistence level in any case and the labor required even more than the nourishment that had been normal in pre-war days.

The rabbis who were frequently called upon to decide such questions always answered in accordance with *halacha* (Jewish law): "The Torah requires us to eat even on the holiest of fast days because to do otherwise is to invite death by starvation — and G-d wants us to exert every effort to live. We are forbidden to surrender to death even though we are too limited to understand the purpose of our living under such circumstances."

Nevertheless, there were always those to whom a Yom Kippur, a smuggled pair of tefillin, a blast of the shofar on Rosh Hashana, a secretly baked morsel of matzah, a bit of oil for a Chanuka flame, a minyan, were worth an encounter with a bullet or, worse, a whip. A group of such people approached their spiritual leader.

"Rav Spira, Yom Kippur is coming. What are we to do? How can we desecrate the Holy Day working as if it were any other day?"

The rabbi was moved as he often was by the devotion of his fellow Jews. He said he would try to help them.

The Bluzhover Rav went to the hated Kapo., "Herr Schneeweiss. As you know, it will soon be Yom Kippur. I am a rabbi and it is important for me to observe this day as properly as possible. A group of my disciples in the camp wish to do the same. We do not ask to be freed from labor, all we ask is that for that one day we be given work which will not force us to violate the law of the Torah. We are willing to do extra work on other days to make up for any labor which goes undone."

That simple request was in itself an act of great heroism, for Schneeweiss, no friend of observant Jews, had in his own hands the power of life and death. He could easily have used the "treasonous" request as a means of proving his loyalty to his SS mentors by turning in the "lazy rabbi who was prepared to sabotage the Master Race's war effort for the sake of his Holy Day foolishness."

Schneeweiss asked for time to consider.

The next day, he told the rabbi that he could choose a limited number of prisoners who would be assigned to clean the apartments of the camp's commanding officers. But he could guarantee them nothing, nor would he defend them if the Germans sensed something wrong. And if there was so much as a speck of dirt to be found anywhere in the house, they would pay with their lives.

So it was that on Yom Kippur an unusual prayer service was held by Rabbi Spira and fourteen young men. The rabbi stood on a window sill polishing the glass while the men were sweeping, dusting, tidying — and all the while he led them in the solemn prayers as he had led congregations for many years in Galicia, but never had the Yom Kippur service been as fervent or as tearful.

At midday, a tray was brought in with food. It lay ignored on a table as the praying and cleaning continued. Then a few German officers entered to admire the work of their servants for the day. They examined the rooms and were pleased — until they saw the food.

*"Jüdische Hunde, fresszt! Stuff yourselves, Jewish dogs!"*

The Jews could not ignore the order. What should they do? Rabbi Spira walked over to the officers and explained: "It is our Holy Day, the day when sins are forgiven. As you have seen, we serve you loyally, even on this sacred day, and our work is perfect. But we are required to fast today and we ask of you to excuse us from eating our meal today. Our work will continue and it will not be affected by hunger."

The officers were furious. They sent for Schneeweiss. Quaking, the Kapo came to the room. "These dogs refuse to eat their rations. You are responsible for them. We shall return in two hours – and if all their food is not eaten, you will be shot."

Schneeweiss stood up straight and unbuttoned his shirt, baring his chest. "I will not force them to eat. I am fasting myself today. If you wish to shoot me, then shoot me now!"

An officer drew his gun and Schneeweiss stood firm. A shot. He was dead.

Hated Schneeweiss had become holy Schneeweiss. Who can estimate the great heights to which every Jewish soul can rise?

Then the Germans turned to the fifteen Jews, who by then were expecting for the same treatment.

"You will continue to work. The food will be removed and you will receive not a scrap to eat until tomorrow morning. Now; go back to work!"

The Talmud tells us: "There are those who acquire their world in many years, and there are those who acquire their world in a single moment" (*Avodah Zarah* 17a). As long as there is the possibility to do teshuvah--to return to G-d and His commandments--one's past can be rectified/compensated for.

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the book, "*Chassidic tales of the Holocaust*" by Yaffa Eliach, who heard the Bluzhover Rebbe recounting it one time when she was in his house. [Submitted by Mrs. C. R. Benami.]

Connection: YOM KIPPUR

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Yisroel Spira, the Bluzhover Rebbe** [5650 – 2 Cheshvan 5750 (1889 – October 1989)], a direct paternal descendant of the *Bnei Yissaschar* and a noted Torah scholar, received rabbinical ordination at the young age of 13. However, he is best known for being an inspiring spiritual leader in the hells of the Nazi concentration camps. After surviving WWII, he moved to the USA, where he re-established the Bluzhev chassidus in Brooklyn. He said of himself, "The reason I remained alive [for so long] was so that I could continue recounting to future generations what happened to us during those [dark] times." [Text and photo from //hevratpinto.org]