

Faith in the Face of Hell

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In the early historiography of the Nazi era, researchers devoted their attention to general processes and topics: Nazi anti-Semitism and policies towards the Jews, the processes that led to the 'Final Solution', and the world of the camps.¹ However, any discussion of the Jews in the Holocaust era must necessarily address the individual as well. Recently, researchers have begun to treat Jewish existence during the Holocaust from a social perspective that emphasizes the individual and his or her proximal world: the Jewish family, which underwent far-reaching changes in the war years; the respective roles of parents, children and young people; relationships between neighbours; folk humour; and the overall mindset of the Jewish community.²

Historical research on women in the Holocaust, also included in this category, indicates that women coped in characteristic ways, just as corresponding typical male responses can be identified. The discussion of the fate of women and their unique problems during the Holocaust can offer us new information and a fresh perspective on a heretofore underexplored dimension of Jewish life.³

Although a considerable body of research discusses the responses – both during and after the Holocaust – of various men of prominence (in particular leaders of the ultra-Orthodox community), the issue of women's faith in God, their observance of Jewish religious commandments under the harshest conditions, and their methods of coping with theological questions raised by the Holocaust during their internment in the camps, have not yet been the subject of intensive research.⁴

The present study addresses the topic of Jewish women in the Nazi concentration camps and their use of faith to cope with an inconceivable reality. I will be examining how religious, traditional and secular women in the camps related to Jewish tradition, faith and God. The research for this chapter is based on memoirs written during the Holocaust, memoirs written after the Holocaust and testimonies collected from survivors after the Holocaust. My intent is to examine how it was possible to observe tradition in the camps.

I will also attempt to offer insights into questions such as the following: Did the harsh conditions affect religious belief and, if so, how and why? Did Jewish women forsake their faith in light of what they witnessed or, on the contrary, was their connection to their faith actually reinforced?

Faith is a sensitive and complex issue with a thousand nuances, and all the more so when addressed in the context of the Holocaust: there are survivors who believe in God but are not religiously observant, while others observe the commandments by rote because they are accustomed to doing so, despite an absence of faith. Since there is no absolute definition of who is considered 'religious' (see Appendix), we are left with a largely subjective set of feelings and personal interpretations of philosophy and theology.⁵ I have therefore chosen to rely on the self-definitions of the women whose testimonies are cited below.

The claim that times of crisis and danger strengthen an individual's bonds with religion is expressed in the ultra-Orthodox memoir literature published in the last two decades, which addresses religious Jewish life in the Holocaust era. In general, there is a trend in this literature to prove that religious Jews withstood the test of the Holocaust, adhered to their faith, observed the commandments under impossible conditions and, moreover, influenced secular Jews and brought them closer to the Jewish religion.⁶

In this article, I do not set out to describe ultra-Orthodox memoirs with their unique perspective on the subject. This complex and difficult issue has already been discussed extensively.⁷ Rather, I attempt to examine the problematic issue of faith and religion in the Holocaust through the eyes of individual women, both observant and non-observant. My major interest is in depicting the various ways in which religion and religious rituals were incorporated into the life of women in the camps.

The central points that emerged from the study can be summed up as follows: first, not all religious women remained devoted to their faith throughout the Holocaust, and many in fact renounced God and Judaism; and second, women frequently drew closer to religion and performed religious rituals for social and not religious reasons. The hardships that they suffered, and the desire to find comfort, motivated the latter to take part not only in Jewish religious rituals, but in secular and Christian observances as well.

RELIGIOUS WOMEN WHO ADHERED TO THEIR BELIEFS IN THE CAMPS

In most instances, life in the concentration camps did not permit the observance of Jewish rites and rituals in strict accordance with *halachah* (Jewish religious law). But those religious acts that the women were able to perform expressed a desire and an inner need to maintain their Jewishness and their human values in the face of Nazism. The observance of tradition helped to

achieve some respite from the reality of the camps, and the women's ties to tradition served to connect them to the past and to the future. They felt a kinship with their forefathers who had stood before Pharaoh and the Maccabees who had faced a mighty enemy and conquered him. Every woman who observed the traditions contributed a unique interpretation of the concept of a 'Jewish lifestyle' or 'the perpetuation of Jewish life'.⁸ Even though the camps in which the women were interned were very different from one another, the testimonies show that in general, the attempt to maintain even a shred of Jewish observance – be it a prayer or some other type of ritual – had more to do with the women than with their surroundings.

Pessia Sharshevsky, a Jewish survivor, recounts a theological discussion between herself and a Nazi officer. Even if the story is not an exact representation of a real event, it is indicative of a religious approach to comprehending the horrors of the Holocaust. Sharshevsky argued with the officer, claiming that Nazism is a combination of all evil human impulses, which erupt to destroy the world and cause it to revert to the original chaos that preceded the Creation. In this schema, the Jews are the wall, the shield, that prevents this diseased evil from spreading. It is impossible to completely uproot the Jewish people, who represent the world's conscience: 'After light has been created, it will never succumb to the pressures of the powers of evil to disappear.'

[The Nazi] closed his fists and shouted like a maniac: 'At 12:00, we will still have the chance to destroy you, all of you, and the world will remain without a conscience.' He laughed ... I didn't add that they were completely in error. You are not the ones who set the clock – there is divine providence that will produce the seedlings, the remnants.⁹

Religious women perceived positive events as evidence of divine intervention. These 'miracles' helped them to fortify their faith and continue to observe the commandments. An Orthodox Hungarian woman who arrived at Auschwitz saw an act of God in the fact that she stayed only one night in Sachsenhausen. Binah Greenwald saw the fact that she could wash her hair at Spandau as 'a gift from heaven' and her success in acquiring tea for her ill friend as 'a miracle'. And Inika Weissbord claims that true healing comes from Heaven, as she and her companions received almost no medicines and nevertheless managed to remain healthy.¹⁰

The women made enormous efforts to observe various religious rituals; in doing so, they sought to relate to life under Nazi persecution in terms of their Jewish beliefs and God's will, and to cling to the meaning that religion provided. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* defines ritual as 'those conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences'.¹¹ Individuals who practise

Jewish rituals are obligated to maintain an awareness of time, as many of the commandments are connected to certain fixed times of the day or year. Through rumours, connections and calculations, the women tried to find out the times for the prayers, the Sabbaths and the holidays. Although actualizing their desire to perform religious rituals was extremely difficult and involved great danger, many women nonetheless found opportunities in the camps to observe the commandments.

In Sommerda camp, they copied the text of a handwritten prayer into small booklets, recited psalms for the sick and dying, and sat *shivah* and lit a candle for the departed.¹² Despite the debilitating hunger, many refused to transgress the dietary prohibition against pork and refused to eat the thin slice of salami given to them twice a week at Auschwitz.

Lighting Sabbath candles is a central ritual of Jewish women, and many testimonies recount the observance of this commandment in secret. The women in the camps had a seemingly inexhaustible ability to find ways to light candles. Sometimes they would gouge a hole in a potato, fill it with margarine and put a rag wick inside; or girls who worked in weapons factories would bring screws from their workplace and fill them with oil designated for machinery maintenance.

Holidays were special events in the concentration camps, evoking memories and despair, on the one hand, and renewed hope, on the other. For many, the holidays were a way to escape daily life, to regain a sense of normality in an abnormal situation, to become strong. The women struggled hard to imbue the holidays with fragments of tradition and holiness that they remembered from home, and there was always a feeling of excitement in the air as the festival approached.

Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) of 1944, a women's group in Thorn camp, adjacent to Danzig, was ordered to prepare the military grounds and dig protective pits. During their work, they recited the holiday prayers and placed guards at the head of each triangular pit to warn them if the German overseer was in sight. They also observed the tradition of *kapparot* (ritual atonement). In one instance, while working in the fields, they caught a fish in the river Visla and used it for *kapparot*. In other camps, bread was used for this purpose. The lighting of candles and a bit of artificial honey reminded the women of Rosh Hashanah as they had celebrated it at home.¹³ These accounts show that, paradoxically, persecution can give rise to new interpretations of *balachab* and religious rituals and customs.¹⁴

Testimonies about fasting at great risk on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) are especially numerous: in one case, female guards at Auschwitz discovered women fasting and, as punishment, prevented them from eating the following evening. Others succeeded in hiding the soup that was their evening meal and eating it only the next day when it was already spoiled. 'It

is hard to explain what I felt at that moment. It was as if a spirit entered me. Suddenly all of them knew that this was Yom Kippur. We fasted all day. That day they prepared better food but no one ate it,' recounts a prisoner from Hanover.¹⁵ The feeling of spirituality and pride is evident in the testimony of Reska Weiss, who recalls the eve of Yom Kippur at the Neumark women's camp: 'The thought inflamed our sleepy brains.' The women worked with more devotion,

and there was no one among us who was not fortified and encouraged by the internal excitement ... Everyone seemed to be full of love and tenderness toward her companions. All of us, even those who did not observe Yom Kippur in their homes, decided that this Yom Kippur would be kept properly. We therefore immediately ate the portion of bread that was given to us and left nothing for the next day. Thus we started our fast.

Their leader asked them to believe and hope that, despite all, they would not die. When she finished speaking, all the women broke into sighs.¹⁶

The holiday of Hanukkah was particularly relevant: the parallel between the Hanukkah story and the Jews' situation in the camps was clear – the victory of the few and the weak over the many and the strong – and the story of the Hanukkah miracle aroused hope in their hearts. In Birkenau, Janowski and other camps, women managed to kindle Hanukkah lights, employing the methods they used for the Sabbath.¹⁷ At Ravensbrück's and later Buchenwald's satellite camp, HASAG-Leipzig, the 'Krakow group' decided to hold a public concert for the occasion for all the residents of block 20. On a table covered with white paper placed at the end of the barracks, they improvised a Hanukkah menorah with candles. Several guests from the Polish blocks gathered by the door. One of the girls lit the first light and pronounced a blessing; the women sang Hanukkah songs and tunes that they had composed especially for that evening.¹⁸

In the Jewish home, cooking holiday meals was the traditional role of the woman. This may be the reason why the camp inmates were so inventive in preparing the customary holiday foods: at the Sommerda camp, on Purim, women baked small cookies made of bread, margarine and carrots which, at least outwardly, 'reminded us of all the kinds of baked goods that we prepared at home'. They also observed the tradition of sending *mishlochei manot* (gifts of food on Purim day) in the camp: one woman gave her companion a slice of bread spread with margarine on which she spelled out the words for 'Happy Purim' using letters made of thin slices of carrot.¹⁹ Another prisoner at Spandau found a small potato in the yard, sliced it, baked it on a small stove and distributed it to her companions as a gift.²⁰

Passover was one of the most important holidays for the women due to its

message of hope, freedom from enslavement, and escape from bondage. There is abundant testimony concerning the observance of Passover in the camps. Most of the Greek women who were imprisoned in Auschwitz did not eat bread on Passover; some succeeded in selling it in exchange for soup in order to avoid eating any bread throughout the holiday. Many women in other camps were strict in observing this prohibition. During Passover, they ate only raw carrots or cooked and mashed potatoes. Berta Farderber-Zaltz from Plaszow succeeded in secretly baking *matzabs*: 'Thanks to such acts, there were Jews in the hell where we lived who ate *matzabs* on Passover, a symbol of our escape from slavery to freedom.'²¹

By contrast, there are narratives of ultra-Orthodox women (largely ignored by the ultra-Orthodox testimonial literature) who, in order to survive, did not observe certain religious laws, such as the dietary prohibitions, in the camps. Regina Steinberg, an Orthodox survivor of Ravensbrück, was convinced in Auschwitz by her cousin, who was also Orthodox, to eat bread with non-kosher salami 'because there is nothing else'. Hungarian girls at Auschwitz, who came from religious homes and knew the Yom Kippur prayers by heart, brought huge pieces of ham to the camp and explained that their rabbi had told them it was permissible to eat pork in time of need to keep strong. A survivor of Ravensbrück testified that, although she was not religious, 'I had never in my life eaten any ham ... or pork.' But when she became ill, she was persuaded to eat it and indeed became well.²²

It has been suggested that Jewish men during the Holocaust were more preoccupied with the religious rituals – like washing the hands, wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries) – that they had performed before the Holocaust, whereas the traditions observed by the women in the camps (who under normal circumstances were less involved with religious ceremony) were aimed at bringing greater meaning to the holy days in the camps and introducing a motif of Jewish identity and pride and some sense of humanity.²³ As demonstrated by the testimonies cited, religious observance provided an anchor of sanity and provided a symbol of order among chaos. Paradoxically, in order to observe Jewish traditions, the women often contradicted customary religious practice, for instance by assuming roles usually performed by men, such as conducting the *seder* on Passover. Burial rituals are another example: at the Thorn camp a young girl committed suicide, forbidden according to Jewish law. Her body was fished out of the river, and the women ritually washed her, contributed pieces of clean white cloth as shrouds, and buried her.²⁴ At times, the desire to perform a ritual opened the door for unconventional adaptations that contradicted Jewish law: in order to observe the commandment of lighting candles, the women sometimes used horse fat (which is not kosher).²⁵

RELIGIOUS WOMEN AND THE LOSS OF FAITH

Similar experiences had an opposite affect on other women: 'How is life with God still possible when Auschwitz exists?' asked Martin Buber.²⁶ It appears that this question haunted even the Orthodox women.

The psychiatrist Victor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor, described two phases in the prisoner's psychological responses to camp life: the period of shock, directly following his or her arrival at the camp, and the period of habituation, in which they become accustomed to camp routine.²⁷ According to the social psychologist and Jewish philosopher Bruno Bettelheim, a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, the prisoner was immediately forced to adapt to drastically new and different conditions of existence; this adjustment usually involved the relinquishment of the individual's moral standards. Afterwards, the soul needed a long period of adaptation in order to return and find a new internal centre of gravity.²⁸

Testimonies indicate that some women already experienced a break with their faith shortly after their arrival at the camp or even beforehand. A religious woman from Hungary recounts how she and her companions were marched to the border and loaded on trains en route to Ravensbrück: 'There were bars on the train. Through them we looked out at the world and thought: Where was the God who allowed them to go on doing this?'²⁹ Rachel Kremer from Khust in Karpatorus was sent to Auschwitz with her three sisters. In the diary she wrote immediately after liberation, she describes her feelings upon arriving at the camp:

Again the complaint against God. Again the question: Why? Why is all this happening? ... No one answers the question: Why? No one hears the scream of pain. How long will this suffering last? God, do You not hear the screams of the tortured? Do You not hear the cries that rise to the heavens? Maybe You don't want to hear, maybe You only want to punish? ... You are the God of punishment and where, God, is Your mercy, where is Your mercy?

Her sister argued that her faith in God helped her to survive, but Rachel did not share her sister's faith.³⁰

For many women, the rupture in their faith deepened over time. Berta Farderber-Zaltz, who with great devotion had secretly baked *matzabs* at Plaszow for Passover 1944, recalls an imaginary dialogue that she held with herself a couple of months later at Bergen-Belsen, which indicates her gradual loss of faith:

I am in Bergen-Belsen, my last stop. Death is running wild all around me ... I held a dialogue, but I don't know with whom – with a neighbour or with myself. But I remember that I wanted to know: Why? For what purpose?

My companion asks: 'And so, do you think that all this befell us because our people sinned and did not observe God's commandments? That God found our murderers worthy to carry out His decisions? But is He not a merciful and a kind God?! The Father of mercy?! And even if we assume that we sinned and transgressed, what about the scholars and the wise men? The elders of the community, our pure and innocent babies? What sin did He find in them?'

My companion becomes full of anger: 'Why are you silent? ... maybe you have no answer at all? For thousands of years our people were tortured and oppressed. We should already be refined and purified as the purest gold, but after years of endless suffering we have been laid upon a new bonfire. The flames lick at the body of our people, who are being burned member by member. Even the skeletons turn to dust. And maybe God is on their side and wants no contact with us, the tortured and the weakened?'

Maybe you're right. Perhaps God has forsaken us ...³¹

By contrast, there are testimonies citing the emotional upheaval of a specific event as causing the break with religious faith. Just as religious women who adhered to their faith led others to similar beliefs, so too the deaths of pious women often caused those around them to distance themselves from religion. One of the strongest protests against God is found in the diary of Rachel Kremer. During a march to Bergen-Belsen, where Rachel was ultimately freed, the daughter of a Hungarian rabbi stumbled and was shot. This woman had spent her days in the camp in prayer, had pronounced a blessing over everything she ate. Her murder was the final straw that broke Rachel's faith:

Did you ever see the death of God? Did you feel the enormity of the loss when God dies for you? ... Did you ever hear a scream of pain, a scream that never escaped the throat of a tortured girl – a young girl and a rabbi's daughter? No, because you didn't hear her silent scream, and you didn't know that she will never scream again. God silenced her scream forever, there in the snow-filled forests, under the rifles of the German soldiers, under the squeak of their boots in the snow. And there God died for me ... Why there in particular, and not in the gas chambers that burned my mother, when I saw the smoke curl up to heaven and God breathed it into Himself and the heavens did not move or fall and crumble? Why not there, where piles and piles of children's bodies were tossed in front of the crematoriums? Why didn't He die for me on the electrified fence of the camp, that fence on which human beings were thrown and burnt? Why didn't He die in the water of the stinking pool where abandoned corpses and suicide victims floated and whose water I drank because of the unbearable thirst and hunger? Why did God die for me in the snow-filled woods? ...

The rabbi's daughter took God away with her death, she took my God from me ... That red-haired girl with the almond-shaped eyes, a face from which heavenly spirituality shone forth. The rabbi's daughter, who mumbled the *Shema* ['Hear, O Israel ...'] when she went to sleep on her hard shelf and blessed her dry bread, became a red stain in the German forests. The farther we walked from there, the smaller the stain became, and an expression of victory appeared on the face of the German soldier who shot the rabbi's daughter.

And where were you, God?³²

SECULAR WOMEN AND RELIGION IN THE CAMPS

As stated, the observance of the commandments by religious women sometimes influenced secular women as well. Prayer was a means to relieve the agony; it brought hearts together and encouraged hope. It offered a way to transcend the daily routine, to find hope in a hopeless place, and, as such, it also affected secular Jews. Women prayed even when they did not know exactly how. Helaine Nadler testifies that one of the women lit candles at Auschwitz on Rosh Hashanah. 'She invented a prayer and the women repeated it after her. This had a tremendous effect. On Yom Kippur, Hassidic girls who arrived at Auschwitz and knew the Yom Kippur prayers by heart prayed and all the women repeated the words, even women who had never prayed before in their lives.'³³ At HASAG-Leipzig, women who had never observed Jewish traditions began to fast. This was a type of communal expression of opposition: 'In the evening every woman blessed her companion. Women hugged each other and wept. There were no candles, and not all of them knew how to pray, but there was one who prayed for them all using a poem she had written.'³⁴ Tova Karni, a Hungarian survivor of Ravensbrück, remembers small performances organized by the patients in the infirmary (*Revier*) at Oranienburg on Friday nights that helped to improve their spirits. On Hanukkah, 'we listened to songs of yearning by the light of the warm Hanukkah candles, which this year remained unlit and burned only in our memories'. Beyond its religious aspects, the yearning was for family life and a secure existence.³⁵

But the religious memoirs that emphasize the influence of the religious women on their secular companions ignore the fact that participation in holidays, prayers or fasts did not always stem from faith in God but rather from the need to seek comfort in a large group, to fortify one's spirit, and to break the daily routine. The various functions of rituals have been the subject of extensive research throughout the years, and will not be dealt with at length here.³⁶ It is clear that religious rituals incorporate individual, secular social and psychological functions as well; their purpose is not only to provide participants with specific principles of belief but to unite them into a

genuine faith community. They are a tool for socialization, and serve an important function in constructing society inasmuch as they create bonds of solidarity within the group, often breaking down social and political divisions. Besides the religious experience, taking part in rituals gives validity to the ascription of the individual to a particular social order and should be regarded as a form of social communication.³⁷

The testimonies indeed reveal that the spiritual and social succour of rituals was one of the important qualities that preserved the women's energies and prevented physical and mental deterioration. Mina Timkevitz, who was sent from Warsaw to Bergen-Belsen with her 4-year-old son Bobos, writes of the psychological influence of such events:

It was enough to see the inspired preparations for birthdays or other festive occasions, the tables set for Passover, to become encouraged and be lifted above the greyness. Cakes were prepared from black bread or pumpernickel and were decorated with 'flowers' of turnip and jam; sandwiches were made in different shapes to resemble houses, clocks, Stars of David ... Considering our limited resources, these foods were indeed prepared artistically. In this way, we cast off the routine.³⁸

Her testimony reveals a type of secular adherence to religion – in this instance, with the aim of transcending daily life. Thus birthdays, anniversaries and other special events took on major significance, in some cases serving as substitutes for religious ritual. This explains why secular cultural activities grew out of such impossible conditions. In Ravensbrück, for example, women wrote poetry, painted, drew, sang and practised the art of storytelling.³⁹

At Plaszow, girls who had been members of the same youth movement in Krakow organized a Friday night *Oneg Shabbat* party. At the end of the long workday, they would dress in as festive a manner as possible and gather together to welcome the Sabbath. They prepared some type of refreshment, lit candles and sang Hebrew songs. The event offered encouragement and camaraderie – a feeling 'that we are not entirely alone'.⁴⁰

Like the songs of religious ritual, the 'secular' songs sung by the women also filled an important role in easing the agony and bringing some meaning to their lives. Apparently at least some of the nostalgia for holidays stemmed from individual psychological needs and was not based exclusively on religious faith. Myrna Goldenberg, who was sent with a group of women from Auschwitz to work in a plant during Hanukkah, relates that they celebrated there with songs and by exchanging wonderful recipes from their memories. Imaginary cooking is mentioned in many other testimonies. The exchange of recipes is not a trivial matter; it had a tremendous psychological impact in that it constituted a link with the future as well as the past. The fact that the recipes were largely related to Sabbath or holiday meals expressed a connection to a

future with a Jewish character. At the same time, the recipes reminded the women of their past, of their former status in the community and the family. Though this accentuated their present hardship, it also brought them hope. Thus the shared recalling of recipes in a situation of severe hunger had the ironic effect of healing.⁴¹

The notion that the women's holiday celebrations reflected a desire to transcend the camp routine, rather than a strictly religious need, is supported by the fact that Jewish women were also attracted to Christian symbols and holidays. Rayah Kagan – author, French left-wing activist and survivor of Ravensbrück and Malchow – was interned in Auschwitz and worked in one of the barracks together with Christian women. The holidays that she celebrated were the Christian ones, along with her work companions. As she relates:

The holidays were about to come. The fever of preparations affected all the women and girls, whatever their nationality or religion. Both believers and non-believers prepared for the holidays – mainly Polish women, but also German and even Jewish. Daughters of Hassidim from Slovakia, who had never before been interested in the Christian Messiah and his birth, were caught up in the feeling of eager anticipation. Hope beat in all our hearts that the holidays would somehow dispel the nightmare that surrounded us and bring us a moment of forgetfulness.

Despite her being Jewish, she received Christmas gifts, participated in holiday songs, and enjoyed a special festive meal that included meat.⁴² Rayah had no connection to Christianity before the Second World War. Her connection, and that of her Orthodox friend, to the Christian holidays in Auschwitz does not indicate faith in Jesus, but rather a desire to transcend the dreary life of the camps and introduce some higher purpose to it.

Jewish women at HASAG-Leipzig also came to hear the concerts organized by the different Christian groups in honour of Christmas. The 'Krakow group' even decided to organize a New Year's Eve concert for the entire camp – 'something to speak to the international audience and be understood by all'. Aware of the great hunger for art among the inmates, they prepared a major performance, and became famous throughout the camp.⁴³ The adoption of Christian symbols was also expressed linguistically: Reska Weiss, who excitedly described the holiness of Yom Kippur at Neumark, chose to call a guard who was kind to her and her companions in the camp by the name 'Santa Claus'.⁴⁴

Testimonies show that some secular Jewish women were attracted to Judaism and/or Christianity because religious celebrations provided them with a feeling of home, of normalization, and helped obliterate – albeit temporarily

– the awful routine of the camps. Within the abnormal reality in which they found themselves, the distinctions between the two religions became blurred; both now served as a focus of entertainment and hope rather than simply of faith.

CONCLUSIONS

The complexity of the issue of religious belief and observance in the concentration camps is reflected in the testimonies surveyed. From the moment of their arrival at the camps, the women were subjected to a cruel and deliberate process of vilification aimed at instilling a sense of inferiority and hopelessness. As illustrated by the various testimonies, the women's methods of coping with camp conditions through religion and God were not one-dimensional nor were they uniform. The women differed from one another in national origin, personality, intellect and morality. As such, they subscribed to individual definitions of 'religion' and perceptions of God.⁴⁵ Some Orthodox women lost their faith during wartime, either fully or partly, while some secular women were drawn to religion and came to rely on their faith to help them survive. The testimonies indicate that, in many cases, the attraction to religion did not necessarily stem from purely religious motives but from a desire to break free of the routine, to transcend the daily misery, to find some sort of social anchor. The women sought to maintain some semblance of identity, and found comfort in solidarity as a means of reducing the stress and tension of their lives in the camps.⁴⁶ Consequently, women who had not been close to tradition before the Holocaust now joined in Jewish prayers, Jewish holidays and even Christian holidays, since the respite from the camp routine, and the introduction of some element of holiness and spirituality into their lives, brought them a measure of hope, support and inspiration.

It is interesting to note that similar norms of behaviour were prevalent among the Christian prisoners as well; these women, too, celebrated the holidays with enthusiasm. They endangered their lives to hide the New Testament, organized prayers to strengthen their own spirits and those of their fellow inmates, saw the hand of God in all things, and daydreamed of holidays that they had celebrated in the company of their families. Just as there were Jewish women who were attracted to Christianity and its rituals, so too were there Christian women who were drawn to the Jewish holidays and participated in them,⁴⁷ while others experienced a rupture in their faith altogether.⁴⁸

APPENDIX

In 1998, questionnaires were distributed to women in Israel who had survived Ravensbrück, as part of the Ravensbrück Research Project. The

questions focused on varying aspects of life, including: place of birth, educational background, economic status and religious beliefs. Since most of the women studied were imprisoned in other camps before being sent to Ravensbrück, and in many cases were transferred from there, generally to nearby satellite camps, the pre- and post-Ravensbrück period was also discussed.

The difficulty of defining oneself religiously is reflected, to some extent, in the responses to the questionnaire. The women were asked to place themselves in one of the following religious categories – ‘Orthodox’, ‘religious’, ‘traditional’ and ‘secular’ – during three different stages in their lives: before, during and after the Holocaust (see Table 1 below). Most of the women selected one of the aforementioned categories, but some requested clarification or protested the need to define their religious beliefs in one word, claiming that ‘it is much more complex’. Others expressed the difficulty of arriving at a religious self-definition by indicating two different categories: in some instances ‘religious and traditional’; in others, ‘secular and traditional’; and in one case, ‘a bit traditional and a bit secular’.

Table 1. Religious Status before the War.

Orthodox	6%
Religious	21%
Religious and traditional	1%
Traditional	45%
Secular	23%
Secular and traditional	4%

Out of 145 respondents, 22 per cent chose not to answer the question about their religious beliefs during the war. The answers of the remaining 113 women contradict the verbal testimonies and therefore reinforce my conclusions regarding the important social aspect of religion. When asked to define their religious beliefs during the war, the majority (65 per cent) of the participants in the study reported that their faith remained unchanged. Roughly one third of the respondents experienced at least some loss of faith, with less than 1 per cent reporting a strengthening of their beliefs.

Table 2. Religious Status during the War.

Stayed the same	65%
Decline in religious belief	34.12%
Increase in religious belief	0.88%

Of the women who declared that they had retained their original religious beliefs, almost half (48 per cent) defined themselves as 'traditional' and a further 15 per cent as 'religious', as shown in the following table:

Table 3. Analysis of Women whose Religious Beliefs Were Unchanged.

Orthodox	1%
Religious	15%
Traditional	48%
Secular	36%

The questionnaire indicates that roughly 34 per cent of the women reported a process of secularization during the war. Of these, 17 per cent experienced a severe decline in religious belief (from Orthodox to secular or from religious to secular). Only one woman reported an increase in religious belief (from 'traditional' to 'religious') as a result of the war, whereas the majority of participants retained the same beliefs or experienced a decline in religious faith.

Contrary to these findings, the testimonies that I cited in the article refer to numerous women who started to participate in religious rituals and observances in the camps. It is this gap between the women's faith and their conduct that reinforces the conclusion that in many cases their participation stemmed from a social need, not a religious one.

NOTES

1. Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
2. Dan Mechman, *The Study of the Holocaust* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Moresheet, 1998); Haya Ostrover, 'Humour as a Self-Defence Mechanism' [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2000).
3. Dalia Ofer, 'The Study of Women and the Holocaust: Significant Contribution or Fashionable Phenomenon' [Hebrew] *Bisvivil Hazikaron*, 16 (September/October 1996), pp.4–10; Daniel Blattman, 'Introduction' [Hebrew], *ibid.*
4. The present article deals primarily with Jewish women. But religion played different roles for Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and even atheists under Nazi persecution: Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp 1939–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2000); Felicja Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow: Skarzysko-Kamienna Slave Labor Camp* (Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996); Karay Felicja, *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labour Camp for Women: The Struggle for Survival, Told by Women and their Poetry* (London and Portland, OR: Valentine Mitchell, 2002).
5. See Suzan Star-Sered's research on the separate religious culture of elderly Oriental women: Suzan Star-Sered, 'Women's Spirituality in a Jewish Context' [Hebrew], in Yael Azmon (ed.), *A Porthole to the Life of Women in Jewish Societies* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1995), pp.245–57.
6. Meir Ivtzan, *Lights in the Dark: Memoirs of a Life of Self-Sacrifice in Soviet Russia* [Hebrew] (New York, 1988); *Remember!: A Collection of Documentation of Self-Sacrifice in the Valley of Death in the Holocaust Era* [Hebrew], Yearbook of the Zakhor Association of Israel (Bnei Brak: Zakhor Association of Israel, 1981–91); Yehezkel Fogel (ed.), *The Tree of the Fathers: Sanctifying the Holy Name in the Holocaust in Philosophy, Halachab and Agadab* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Ramah, 1993). The role of ultra-Orthodox women is also mentioned in this literature. See Rivka Vilba, *Your Faith in*

- the Nights* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1977); Rachel Hork, *Faith That Withstood the Test* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Pri Haaretz, 1986).
7. See a summary and new conclusions in Kimi Kaplan, 'The Religious-Orthodox Community in Israel and its Relation towards the Holocaust – A New Reading' [Hebrew], *Alpaim*, 17 (1999), pp.176–207.
 8. Yaffa Eliach, 'Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate', in Israel Gutman and Avital Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1984), pp.195–206.
 9. Pessia Sharshevsky, *Rays of Light in the Darkness of Hell* [Hebrew] (Bnei Brak: n.p., 1968), pp.55–8.
 10. Binah Grinwald, *Lights from Darkness* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: published by the author, 1998), pp.51, 59–61; Yad Vashem Archives (hereafter: YVA), 0.33/190, p.7; *ibid.*, 0.3/9416, pp.66–148. The researcher, Melissa Raphael, argues, from a feminist post-Holocaust theological perspective, that God or the *Shekhina* (the traditionally female image of the indwelling presence of God) revealed its face in the acts of kindness and caring of women towards one another in the camps. They were a form of cleansing, and to be clean is to be visible to God. Thus these acts of caring and helping between women had a double meaning: they welcomed God into the camps and reflected the revelation of the *Shekhina*. See M. Raphael, *The Female Face of God In Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2003).
 11. E.M. Zuesse, 'Ritual', *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp.405–22.
 12. Naomi Winkler Munkacsi, 'Jewish Religious Observance in Women's Death Camps in Germany', *Yad Vashem Bulletin* (Jerusalem, 1967), pp.35–8.
 13. *Ibid.*, pp.37–8.
 14. The testimonies indicate that in the absence of resources and an authoritative establishment, women choose their own way in terms of religion. This is true not only in times of crisis. For example, the anthropologist Suzan Star-Sered has discovered that in present-day Israel, elderly illiterate Oriental women find unique interpretations of religion and religious life, and produce a 'feminine religion' of their own: Star-Sered, 'Women's Spirituality in a Jewish Context' [Hebrew], in Azmon (ed.), *A Porthole to the Life of Women in Jewish Societies*.
 15. Eliach, 'Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate' in Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*.
 16. *Ibid.*, pp.198–200; Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow*, p.197; Winkler Munkacsi, 'Jewish Religious Observance in Women's Death Camps in Germany', *Yad Vashem Bulletin*, pp.37–8; YVA, 0.3/8089, p.10; Reska Weiss, *Journey through Hell* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1961), pp.147–9.
 17. Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, p.171; Winkler Munkacsi, 'Jewish Religious Observance in Women's Death Camps in Germany', *Yad Vashem Bulletin*, p.38; Eliach, 'Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate', in Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, p.202.
 18. Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labour Camp*, pp.183–5.
 19. Winkler Munkacsi, 'Jewish Religious Observance in Women's Death Camps in Germany', *Yad Vashem Bulletin*, p.38.
 20. Grinwald, *Lights from Darkness*, p.63.
 21. Berta Farderber-Zaltz, *And the Sun Shone* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Neie Leben, 1968), pp.87–8. See also Eliach, 'Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate', in Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, pp.202–5; Winkler Munkacsi, 'Jewish Religious Observance in Women's Death Camps in Germany', *Yad Vashem Bulletin*, p.38; Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, p.171; Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow*, pp.197; Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labour Camp*, p.213; Grinwald, *Lights from Darkness*, pp.63–4; YVA, 0.3/8089, p.10.
 22. YVA, 0.3/7654, pp.58–9. See also *ibid.*, 0.3/9497, pp.46–7.
 23. Felicia Karay, 'Women in the Forced Labor Camps', in Dalia Ofer and Leonore J. Weitzman (eds), *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), pp.285–309 (esp. p.301); Eliach, 'Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate', in Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, pp.204–5.
 24. Winkler Munkacsi, 'Jewish Religious Observance in Women's Death Camps in Germany', *Yad Vashem Bulletin*, p.38; Karay, 'Women in Forced Labor Camps', in Ofer and Weitzman (eds), *Women in the Holocaust*, p.301; Eliach, 'Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate', in Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, pp.202–5.
 25. Eliach, 'Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate', in Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps* pp.195, 198. The opportunity to observe religious rituals and commandments was largely dependent on the type of camp (work camp or death camp, family camp or a camp where family members were separated), the camp's structure, the character of

- the camp's administrator, the camp's geographic location, the national origin of the guards and the duration of internment. All of these factors must be considered in discussing religious culture in the camps. Winkler Munkacsi, 'Jewish Religious Observance in Women's Death Camps in Germany', *Yad Vashem Bulletin*, pp.35–8; Rayah Kagan, *Women in the Chamber of Hell* [Hebrew], (Merhavia: Sifriat Hapoalim, 1947); Bracha Rozner-Hollander, *Symbols of Suffering: Memories of the Holocaust* [Hebrew] (n.p., n.d.), p.52; Hermann Langbein, *Against All Hope* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), p.326.
26. David Birnbaum, *God and Evil* (New Jersey: Ktav, 1989), p.11.
 27. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: From the Death Camps to Existentialism* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1970), p.19; 1st edn, Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston: Beacon, 1959).
 28. Eliezer Berkovits, *I Am with Him in His Sorrow: The Sanctification of Life in the Ghettos and the Extermination Camps* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988), pp.54–5.
 29. YVA, 0.3/8468, p.8.
 30. Rachel Kremer, *A Girl Whose Name I Don't Remember: Memoirs of a Girl in the Holocaust* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1992), pp.90, 109–10, 120.
 31. Farderber-Zaltz, *And the Sun Shone*, pp.143–4. Eibschitz, in *Of Matzabs and Bitter Herbs*, only mentions the baking of the *matzabs* and ignores incidences that indicate loss of faith in the chapter 'I Hold Court with the Master of the World'. See Yehoshua Eibschitz (ed.), *Of Matzabs and Bitter Herbs: Acts of Heroism and Sacrifice to Observe the Commandments of Passover in the Ghettos and Camps in the Holocaust Era* [Hebrew] (Kiryat Ata: published by the author, 1974), p.19.
 32. Kremer, *A Girl Whose Name I Don't Remember*, pp.121–3.
 33. YVA, 0.3/8523, p.47.
 34. Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labour Camp*, p.173.
 35. Tova Karni, *In the Shade of the German Forests, 1944–1945* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Express Print, 1959), pp.127–9. See also Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labour Camp*, pp.183–5.
 36. Among them, see David I. Kertzer, *Ritual Politics and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Robert Forster, *Ritual, Religion, and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty, *Myths, Rites, Symbols* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
 37. Zuesse, 'Ritual', *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp.405–22.
 38. Mina Timkevitz, *Life Was Also There: Pages from Bergen-Belsen* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: N. Tabersky, 1946), pp.97–8.
 39. Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, pp.146–68; Inika Weissbord, *Together and Alone in the Face of the Terror* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1992), p.175; Eliach, 'Jewish Tradition in the Life of the Concentration-Camp Inmate', in Gutman and Saf (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, p.196.
 40. Ruth Kornblum-Rosenberg, *A Vow: Memories 1939–1945* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1986), pp.45, 53–4.
 41. Inika Weissbord, *Together and Alone in the Face of the Terror*, pp.210–11; Goldenberg, 'Memories of Auschwitz Survivors', in Ofer and Weitzman (eds), *Women in the Holocaust*, pp.327–39.
 42. Kagan, *Women in the Chamber of Hell*, pp.117–30. Yehoshua Eibschitz cites from Kagan's book in which she testifies to the religiosity of others, but he ignores this testimony. See Eibschitz (ed.), *Of Matzabs and Bitter Herbs*, pp.32–5.
 43. Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labour Camp*, pp.182–99.
 44. Weiss, *Journey through Hell*, p.165.
 45. Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1950; New York: Farrar, Straus, 1950), pp.272–3.
 46. Joel E. Dimsdale (ed.), *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators* (Washington, DC: Hemisphere, 1980), p.237.
 47. Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labour Camp*, pp.175–8, 183–5; Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), pp.179–204; Sylvia Salvesen, *Forgive – But Do Not Forget* (London: Hutchinson, 1958), pp.156–8; Langbein, *Against All Hope*, p.321; Doris Ronowicz, (trans.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories* (Warsaw: Interpress, 1970), pp.125, 153.
 48. Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, p.185.