

Reading 15B

SURVIVAL AS RESISTANCE

Under unique circumstances like those of the Holocaust, “resistance” has to be refined. Armed resistance was almost impossible—yet, it did occur. But another type of resistance became a way of life for Jews: to defeat death, from moment to moment and hour to hour. Even if survival was a result of what some survivors say was “pure luck,” it represented resistance. Each day of survival meant successfully resisting the Nazi plan of genocide. To survive, to live, meant resistance.

As was apparent from “A ‘Normal’ Day in Auschwitz,” the prisoners lost the freedom to make choices. To make choices was to act like a human being. One scholar has noted that committing suicide was one of the first signs of resistance by prisoners. They chose to die when they could make no choices about anything else. Some chose to attempt escape, although few succeeded. Survivors described small acts of “sabotage.” Some at Auschwitz tore clothing apart as they sorted through clothes in the *Brezhinka*. Others reported pouring sand into machinery they were forced to build in slave labor camps.

One prisoner of Auschwitz washed his hands in extremely filthy water each day. When another prisoner asked him why he bothered to “wash” in such water, he replied: “To prove to myself that I am still a human being.” As he stood on the *Appelplatz* on his first full day in Auschwitz, a fourteen-year-old boy, alone after being separated from his family the day before, met an old man standing next to him. “What portion of the Bible were you studying at home?” the old man asked him. The boy told him. “We will begin reciting at that place today and go further each day,” the old man whispered. “Why?” asked the boy. “To continue.” Simple, routine or ritual acts became choices that allowed people to maintain links with their former lives.

Praying, one of the most serious “crimes” in any of the concentration, labor or death camps, was an act of resistance. Several survivors recall conducting secret religious services in the barracks. They risked their lives with this action but maintained their identity as Jews. This, to them, was resistance. One survivor of a labor camp recalled that on the Jewish Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, she and many other prisoners chose to observe the religious tradition of fasting. When the SS guards discovered that these Jews were not eating, they forced them to do hours of punishing exercise. Then, those prisoners were not given rations for two days.

Those who survived have spoken of these acts as resistance – defeating the Nazi insistence that they become less than human.

The Nazis forced their victims to give up part of what it meant to be human: the freedom of choice. They tried to rob Jews of their human status.

Questions

1. What does “resistance” mean and why is it noble?

- 2. What are some examples of the different types of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust?**
- 3. How is “survival as resistance” different from automatic antagonism toward authority?**
- 4. Why do people resist?**