

ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF RABBINIC STUDIES

Today's Torah

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WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING - APRIL 19, 1943
BY RABBI DR. MICHAEL BERENBAUM | BIO



Four score years ago in April 1943, the Jews of Warsaw rose in armed resistance to their German occupiers.

In the free world, Jews were celebrating Passover, the historic journey from slavery in Egypt and the journey through the desert to the Promised Land millennia ago.

In ghettos of occupied Poland – even in the death camps – Jews were eating the bread of affliction for years yet even they could dream of freedom, “Now we are slaves, next year”.... Will there be a next year, they wondered? Will there be a next day?

Never had Jews retold the story of Exodus in such darkness.

In Warsaw, more than 265,000 Jews had already been deported to Treblinka, a Nazi death camp where only a handful survived. There were no *selektions* in Treblinka, all were sent immediately to their death.

The old had been deported and the young, families, communities, entire blocks. whole neighborhoods – all those who remained in the ghetto understood that deportation = death.

The Germans, aided by Ukrainian troops, surrounded the ghetto. A *Judenrein*, a Jew free Warsaw,

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would die unless...

They Jewish underground proclaimed:

Jewish masses, the hour is drawing near. You must be prepared to resist. Not a single Jew should go to the railroad cars. . . . Our slogan must be: All are ready to die as human beings.

How desperate was their plight?

We saw ourselves as a Jewish underground whose fate was a tragic one, the first to fight. For our hour had come without any sign of hope or rescue.

With nothing to lose – everything had been lost – Jewish youth organizations rose in rebellion, with a few rifles and guns, armed with homemade Molotov cocktails, they forced the Germans to retreat.

Zivia Lubetkin, a Warsaw Ghetto resistance leader recalled:

When the Germans came up to our posts and marched by and we threw those hand grenades and bombs and saw German blood pouring over the streets of Warsaw . . . there was much rejoicing. The tomorrow did not worry us. The rejoicing amongst the Jewish fighters was great and, see the wonder and the miracle, those German heroes retreated, afraid and terrorized from Jewish bombs and hand grenades, homemade.

Their victory, however dramatic, was short lived. The Germans returned and when they could not prevail, they burned the ghetto building by building, block by block. The Jews continued to fight, the few against the mighty and they held out for almost a month, longer than some of the armies of European countries. Still Mordecai Anielewicz wrote to his friend Yitzhak Zuckerman.

What we have experienced cannot be described in words. We are aware of one thing only: what has happened has exceeded our dreams. The Germans ran twice from the ghetto. . . . I have the feeling that great things are happening, that what we have dared is of great importance. . . .

What really matters is that the dream of my life has become true. Jewish self-defense in the Warsaw ghetto has become a fact. Jewish armed resistance and retaliation have become a reality. I have been witness to the magnificent heroic struggle of the Jewish fighters.

But Anielewicz did not have the final word.

On May 16th the German commander blew up the Tłomackie Street synagogue – The Great Synagogue of Warsaw – and wrote to his superiors, “The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw is no longer.”

General Jurgen Stropp captured and deported those Jews who had not been killed, still a few escaped through the sewers to continue the fight.

Still, he too, did not have the final word. That judgment belongs to history.

The Warsaw ghetto uprising was nothing less than a revolution in Jewish history. Jews had resisted the Nazis with armed force. The significance and symbolic resonance of the uprising went far beyond the numbers of those who fought and died.

It may not have changed the course of the war or the fate of European Jews, but it may have changed the character of the Jews.

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