

And let your brother live with you. (25:36)

The *Talmud* (*Bava Metzia* 62a) discusses the *halachah* of a hypothetical case in which two men are stranded in the wilderness with one serving of life-sustaining water between them. What do they do? If both drink – both die; if one drinks, he will survive, but his friend will not. *Ben Peturah* derives from the words, *V'chai achicha imach*; “Better they should both perish than one should see his friend die, while he survives. (Your brother shall live with you.) This was the accepted opinion until Rabbi Akiva came and taught, “And your brother shall live with you” – indicating that your life takes precedence over the life of the other. The *Chidushei HaRim*, *zl*, posits that only someone of Rabbi Akiva’s spiritual plateau, who was able to declare (*Berachos* 61b), “All my days I was troubled by the *pasuk*, *B'chol nafshecha*; ‘with all your soul,’ meaning even if He takes your soul. When will the opportunity come to my hands that I may fulfill this *pasuk*?” Rabbi Akiva made this statement as he was martyred by the Romans. Indeed, he drew out his suffering (so to speak), so that his soul would leave him as he recited the word, *Echad*. Rabbi Akiva lived his life for the purpose of sanctifying and glorifying Hashem’s Name. Only such a person has the right to demand that *Chayecha kodmin*; your life takes precedence. A Jew who has lived his life for the purpose of perpetuating his own pleasures, however, to satisfy his own whims – what right does he have to say, *Chaycha kodmin*?

The concept of living solely to sanctify Hashem’s Name, or, as it was coined during the Holocaust, *Kiddush HaChaim*, was realized by the holy Jews who made every effort to live amidst pain and deprivation, so that they could serve Hashem and glorify His Name with every last ounce of their being. I write about three distinguished *Rabbanim*, the last three rabbinic leaders to survive the purges and deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto: *Horav Shimshon Stockhammer, zl*, *Horav Menachem Ziembra, zl*, *Horav David Shapiro, zl*.

It was the summer of 1942, when the Jewish community of Warsaw first learned of Hitler’s extermination camps. *Rav Yaakov Rabinowitz*, brother of the *Munkatcher Rebbe*, *Horav Baruch, zl*, managed somehow to escape the Treblinka Camp and make his way back to Warsaw. He shared with its leadership a tale of horror and chaos. Although there were those few who did not believe their ears, the *Rabbanim* of Warsaw urged all Jews to hide their children and to seek every which way to get them out of the ghetto – especially their daughters.

It did not take long for conditions in Warsaw to deteriorate. Thousands of Jews were rounded up and deported to various concentration camps. By early 1943, the three aforementioned *Rabbanim* were all that remained of the rabbinic leadership of Warsaw. On April 19, 1943, they were given a chance to escape, when the Judenrat received a message from Warsaw’s Catholic Church stating that if the three clergymen were to leave within twenty-four hours, the church would guarantee their safe passage. They had one hour to render their decision.

After a brief discussion, *Rav Shapiro* declared, “I am the youngest of this group so my words are not binding on you. We know what we are unable to help our people. While we cannot save them,

our presence among them gives them courage and strengthens their hopes. This is the only encouragement we can give these remaining Jews.”

Rav Menachem Ziemba was the group’s spokesman. He told the church officials that they had no room for discussion: they were not abandoning their brothers and sisters. A short while later, during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, *Rav Menachem Ziemba* died a martyr’s death. *Rav Stockhammer* spent the next two years in different concentration camps. He lived through terrible deprivation, but never stopped “living,” because he knew that every moment of life was a *Kiddush Hashem*. Right before *Pesach* of 1945, *Rav Stockhammer* decided that he would not eat any *chametz* for all eight days of *Pesach*. This meant not eating anything, because some form of *chametz* derivative or absorption was in everything that they were “served.” He proclaimed, “I am aware of the *halachah* (that under the circumstances he could and should eat); there are, however, 2,500 Jews in this camp. At least one Jew among us should refrain from eating *chametz* this year. I have decided to do so. I have undertaken the responsibility with love and joy!”

For all eight days of *Pesach*, *Rav Stockhammer* lived like a *malach*, Heavenly angel. He ate no food, subsisting only on a little water. His efforts at sanctifying life were superhuman. Despite his weakened state, he performed his daily slave labor as demanded by his cruel taskmasters.

When the Germans saw that their end was near, they evacuated their Jewish prisoners, forcing them to walk for days on long death marches, cramming them by the hundreds onto trains heading toward the west. A mere three days before the liberation, the train on which *Rav Stockhammer* was forced to ride was attacked and struck by a bomb. *Rav Stockhammer* suffered serious wounds, to which he succumbed. Very little is known of this holy *neshamah* whose *yahrzeit* is *Iyar* 13. He lived his life *b’kedushah*, sanctifying every fibre of his being in his service to Hashem. So many brothers and sisters perished under the most inhumane conditions, many of whom did not reach *kever Yisrael*. They were murdered because they were Jews, but they merited to sanctify Hashem’s Name both in life and in death. We have a collective moral obligation to perpetuate their memories by sanctifying our own lives, *b’Kiddush HaChaim*.