

Who Shall Perish by Zyklon B Gas

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As a youngster in Germany I said the famous *Unetane Tokef* (We Cede Power) prayer on each Rosh Hashanah. I sat with my father at the great synagogue in Hannover, Germany, until I witnessed the burning of that beautiful building on Kristallnacht in 1938. This poetic prayer begins, “We shall ascribe holiness to this day.” With great fervor, I recited in German and in Hebrew,

*On Rosh Hashana it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die,
Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,
Who shall perish by water and who by fire,
Who by sword and who by wild beast...*

As a Modern Orthodox teen in New York City I was convinced that my many transgressions would land me on the negative side of the poem’s frightening equation. Each year I feared I would be consumed by fire. After all, I had eaten unkosher food. I had fights at school and sometimes – this, according to our rabbi, was a major sin – I boasted.

The concept of a decision-making God has haunted me all the years of my long life. As a scholar, I want to know the criteria. As a witness to the Holocaust, I object to a God who might decide capriciously.

The term “Holocaust” comes from the Greek roots for “whole” and “burnt.” Originally it was used to reference “burnt offerings” and then to “burning at the stake.” Ultimately the term was applied to mass conflagrations – catastrophes by fire. After the Shoah, the mid-twentieth-century genocide, “Holocaust” seemed an appropriate label because of the millions who became ashes and smoke in Nazi crematoria.

I think of the Holocaust when I read the Unetane Tokef prayer. I think of my cousin, Aaltje Wurms, who, on the 19th of February, 1943, experienced an Auschwitz gas chamber and an Auschwitz crematorium. Cousin Aaltje lived 3½ years.

*On Rosh Hashana it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed...
Who shall perish by Zyklon B gas and who by fire.*

I understand death at old age. I understand death by cancer. I have trouble understanding man-made death – especially genocide. What kind of God decides that one million children will be murdered?

We are told that redemption comes with prayer, charity and repentance. Did Aaltje not pray enough? Was she insufficiently charitable? How at age 3½ could she, in her innocence, have repented more adequately?

Let those who find these thoughts sacrilege explain why all I have left of Aaltje is one photograph. Even the ashes and smoke are gone. Was that decided on Rosh Hashana and sealed on Yom Kippur?

