

Rabbinic Responsa: Keeping Kosher in the Ghetto



Subject Area: Jewish Topics – Rabbinic Responsa - Ghettos
Topic: Rabbinic Responsa - Keeping kosher in the ghettos
Grade Level: 8 - 9th
Duration: 30 minutes
Standard Addressed: CIJE

Learning Aim: Students will

- Recognize the ways Rabbis guided Jews to keep *halacha* during the Shoah.
- Analyze complex choices faced by Jews during the Shoah.

Description of the Lesson:

Jewish individuals and communities during the Shoah turned to their rabbis for guidance and wisdom in coping with unprecedented challenges. This series will explore real examples of these questions and the accompanying response from rabbinic leadership.

In this activity, students will explore the question of whether Jewish people were obligated to keep kosher when faced with starvation in the ghettos.

Consider

- *Read the following with students:*
 - In the Lodz ghetto, some Jews made an effort to eat kosher food and to open kosher kitchens. However, as starvation in the ghetto worsened and the Germans brought in soup and horse meat, ghetto inhabitants questioned whether they should continue following the laws of kashrut or if they should eat whatever food was available in order for them to survive.

For two years, a rabbinical board in Lodz issued rulings on community matters. They gave rulings concerning food three times.

On February 23, 1941 (Rosh Chodesh Adar 5701) they permitted two groups to eat non-kosher meat: women who had just given birth and people who were weak. Jews had to receive a medical opinion stating that they needed the non-kosher meat, and a personal rabbinic ruling saying they fell into one of the permitted categories.

Permission was next given to save human life—*pikuach nefesh*.

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Consider (continued)

- On May 27, 1941 (Rosh Chodesh Sivan 5701) the rabbis announced that all the children who had become weak and who doctors felt were in mortal danger could eat the non-kosher meat.
In their instructions the rabbis wrote, “They are permitted and required to eat meat.”
Finally, on July 22 1941 (Tammuz 27 5701) they announced that all children could eat the non-kosher meat.
The rabbis personally tried to persuade those who refused to eat non-kosher food not to endanger their lives by avoiding foods that could help them live – such as non-Kosher meat.
- **Discuss:**
 - *What are the differences in rulings at different points in time?*
 - *Why didn't the ghetto rabbis give one consistent ruling on this matter?*
 - *What did the rabbis mean by permitted and required?*

Collect

- **Watch this clip:**
- Explain to students that they will now view a clip of testimony to further understand the challenge of keeping kosher in the ghettos. Distribute Milton Belfer's biography and have students read it quietly to themselves. Direct students to focus on key words/phrases and encourage them to take notes on what stands out to them as they watch the clip together:
 - *Milton Belfer - In this clip Milton Belfer talks about the struggle to maintain kashrut, even though it was his family's tradition, in the context of the ghetto. His father resisted and did not survive because he was unable to get the nutrients that he needed.*

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Construct

- Ask students to break up into pairs and watch the clip a second time. Invite them to discuss the following question with their partner:
 - *Even though the Rabbis counseled against this, what did it mean to Milton's father to keep kosher in such difficult times, even when it meant endangering his own life?*

Communicate

- Ask students to debate and discuss the value of each side. Encourage them to consider the thought process for both perspectives.

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Discussion Handout

In the Lodz ghetto, some Jews made an effort to eat kosher food and to open kosher kitchens.

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Permission was next given because of the fear for human life—*pikuach nefesh*.

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Discuss the following:

- What are the differences in rulings at different points in time?
- Why didn't the ghetto rabbis give one consistent ruling on this matter?
- What did the rabbis mean by permitted and required?