**DOC. 12**

**On 10 and 11 October 1941 the teacher Chaim Kaplan writes about religious life and the typhus pandemic in the Warsaw ghetto**[[1]](#footnote-1)

Diary of Chaim Kaplan,[[2]](#footnote-2) entries for 10 and 11 October 1941

10 October 1941

We saw an indication of ‘Netsach Yisrael’[[3]](#footnote-3) in the opening of our synagogues for worship. On the eve of the festival,[[4]](#footnote-4) our sanctuaries were again illuminated and crowded with celebrating multitudes.[[5]](#footnote-5) Once again the holy and warm Hebrew atmosphere filled our synagogues; once again we communed with our Father in Heaven in His Tabernacle;[[6]](#footnote-6) once again the voice of the God of Israel, emanating from our eternal Torah, reached our ears. From the depths of our plight, we poured out our prayers from our anguished, agonized hearts. Despite all the deep woes, we sensed some relief from the mere fact that our days have been renewed as of old[[7]](#footnote-7) (‘as of old’ for us means: before the war!). Three houses of congregation opened their doors for joy and prayer: none other than the Great Synagogue on Tłomackie Street, the synagogue that [Nożyk](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zalman_No%C5%BCyk&action=edit&redlink=1) established on Twarda Street,[[8]](#footnote-8) and the Lithuanian, Mizrachi–Zionist ‘Moriah’ Synagogue on Dzielna Street. All of which [was done] officially. But from the standpoint of the Jewish ‘Council’, which was given discretion for the whole matter under certain conditions that the occupier had imposed on it,[[9]](#footnote-9) there was nothing standing in the way of setting up a minyan[[10]](#footnote-10)in every building, and this option was put to use in many courtyards. There is no courtyard that failed to organize a minyan for those living there and in the adjoining houses. The incessant tribulations have admittedly led to an increase in the number of unbelievers among the Jews; nevertheless, all the ‘minyans’ were full to capacity. Everyone had longed to come together, for the Hebrew congregation, for the shared religious atmosphere that had eluded them for two years. At home, there is great boredom. You die if you don’t have friends.[[11]](#footnote-11)

But even then, in the midst of our festive days, foreboding clouds filled our skies – on the agenda was the liquidation of the ‘Grzybowy ghetto’[[12]](#footnote-12) and additional territorial changes to our disadvantage. Twarda was to be excised from the ghetto and, with it, the [Nożyk](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zalman_No%C5%BCyk&action=edit&redlink=1) Synagogue; even the Tłomackie Synagogue was in grave danger of passing into the oppressor’s hands. After all, there is nothing peculiar or barbaric that he wouldn’t do. But all that fear proved unnecessary. For the time being, only the odd numbers on Sienna Street and certain parts of Komitetowa and Wielka Streets have fallen victim to Nazi villainy.

I attended services at ‘Moriah’, which glowed with the light of the Seven Days[[13]](#footnote-13) on the festival nights. The holy lamps of the ruined Danzig Synagogue, which were moved to ‘Moriah’, flooded [it] with an ocean of light. These are gigantic bronze lamps, products of amazing artistic craft.[[14]](#footnote-14) When the Danzig congregation was exiled, so were its lamps, but by good fortune they were privileged once again with spreading their light in the Tent of Jacob[[15]](#footnote-15) and not in some Catholic or Protestant church. It’s all a matter of luck![[16]](#footnote-16)

In 1939, on the eve of the war, the ‘Moriah’ Synagogue underwent major renovation. It wasn’t minor maintenance work, such as filling in dents in the walls or a ceiling that needed repair, but a massive overhaul involving fundamental structural and architectural renovations that changed the features of the synagogue from top to bottom. A sum of 30,000 złoty was spent on this renovation, which at the time was worth 6,000 dollars (currently 600 dollars). The work was almost finished, but then the war broke out, and so it was never completed. The project came to a sudden halt, and everything was cut off and torn out. A terrible catastrophe fell upon Polish Jewry. Whole communities faced deportation and exile. Tens of thousands of refugees sought shelter in Warsaw. The gabbais[[17]](#footnote-17) of ‘Moriah’ said, ‘It’s time to act for our nation’s outcasts – disrupt your prayers.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Only a few days later, the [occupying] authorities also issued an edict banning worship altogether. With that, the halls of ‘Moriah’ were declared assembly points for refugees. Hundreds of expellees and displaced persons, the most unfortunate of the unfortunate, found in ‘Moriah’ a place of refuge for their wretched bodies. They turned it into a malodorous place, replacing its sanctity with stench and fetor. Misery and suffering turn people into barbarians. In their ignorance and brutishness, they took no heed of the building or its furnishings and holy implements. Everything was befouled and defaced; everything was broken and destroyed; they left nothing intact[[19]](#footnote-19) behind. But when it came time to restore its days as of old, no heed was paid to all this. Everything was restored and even improved, and for the High Holidays in 5702,[[20]](#footnote-20) ‘Moriah’ Synagogue stood as it had before in its purity, splendour, and sanctity.

‘The adversary stretched forth his hand upon everything precious to [us]’[[21]](#footnote-21) – and the hand came away dry.

11 October 1941

Typhus is wreaking havoc[[22]](#footnote-22) on us! When two of us get together and one tells the other about a third friend’s illness, he doesn’t call the disease by name, because its name is known anyway; it’s presumably ‘the’ illness and none other. The same happens when a person dies: no one just dies; it’s only because of that illness. It’s claiming an enormous toll, and the victims are innumerable. There are households that have lost half of their members. Within our immediate circles, each one of us can count dozens of people who have been sacrificed on the altar of the ghastly typhus. The number of deaths is endless.

Who brought this into our world? Anyone [you ask][[23]](#footnote-23) will give you the answer that the tyrannical occupier gave it to us as a gift. Before he came, we weren’t familiar with it, even though we knew its nature. When the deportations, expulsions, discrimination, and vile decrees began, and with them the overcrowding, the stress, the poverty, and the hunger, typhus came along with them, and because it’s a contagious disease, it is spreading steadily – even in the affluent circles. Recently there have been deaths in wealthy families due to typhus. And such cases have become so prevalent and commonplace that the beggars are rejoicing, expressing their feelings of revenge publicly and loudly.

There are no privileged people before the Holy One! What’s more, beggars go on to recover while the high-and-mighty die. A body that has been hardened for survival and isn’t pampered can withstand even a dangerous disease, whereas the pampered one – a single glance at him and he is no more.[[24]](#footnote-24)

And here it’s worth noting another amazing claim that the Nazi makes about himself, in which he isn’t suspected of lying. In his newspaper, he once complained that the Jews were spreading typhus microbes and infecting the Aryans who visit their environs and come into contact with them.[[25]](#footnote-25) Hence the warning to beware of the Jews and keep distance from them! And to demonstrate the Jews’ ‘guilt’ even more powerfully, he also noted that more infected Aryans were dying than were Jews. As he put it, a Jew who develops typhus eventually recovers, whereas Germans and Poles ultimately die. The upshot of the whole thing, therefore, is that typhus-stricken Germans die; Poles follow their lead; and the affluent Jews transgress the injunction against ‘following the Gentiles’ ways’[[26]](#footnote-26) by also dropping dead. The exceptions to the rule are the Jewish beggars; the disease does not have enough power over them to take their lives. And who is to blame for this situation? The Jews, of course! They don’t keep themselves clean; they’re dirty and befouled by nature. The overcrowding? That’s got nothing to do with it; that’s not the reason. The stress? That’s not it either. The high price of soap? Who bothers with such a trivial thing? Hunger? That’s not the cause of the disease either. The fatal housing conditions? They’re not to blame.What then?

It’s [our] racial blood that does it. From blood everything comes and to blood everything returns.[[27]](#footnote-27) Blood is the person![[28]](#footnote-28)  The *Stürmer* adds: Even typhus is just Jewish ‘swindle’. It’s revenge against the non-Jews! The sanitation laws that the occupier passed in order to stanch the epidemic are, for us, a plague that’s not written in the Torah.[[29]](#footnote-29) Here, too, as in other matters, chaos reigns and the strict rules don’t bring about the cure that’s needed and do not achieve the goal except bribing the sanitation people, who in their greed deem everything kosher and put all stringencies aside. When the epidemic began, the custom was to impose a two-week quarantine on the courtyard [of those buildings] where any case of typhus occurred. They simply posted a policeman at the gate – sometimes a Gentile, sometimes a Jew – and no one was allowed to come or go.[[30]](#footnote-30) Everyone living adjacent to the courtyard was separated and distanced from the outside world like the impure and lepers. All of this was in theory. In practice, however, you could come and go if you had two or three złoty to spare and stuffed them into the hand of the ‘upholder of the law’. Another large source of income for the sanitation staff is the disinfection of all apartments bordering on the tainted courtyard, no exceptions allowed. By spraying Lysol and other disinfectants, they despoil and destroy household implements until they are no longer recognizable. A person’s fortune goes out the window. But here, too, bribery comes in handy. Afterwards, everyone living in the courtyard has to march under police inspection to the public bathhouse that’s reserved for this purpose. It’s a special torture, even if it isn’t one of those that a Jew must undergo on Yom Kippur.[[31]](#footnote-31) A mass bathhouse such as this kills the lice – along with the person. Its primitive conditions and the dirty, disgusting people around you may bring all sorts of diseases and dire straits upon you. The place of cleanliness – that’s where disease lurks. So even here money is the answer for everything.[[32]](#footnote-32) And just as the ghetto was built to enrich the Nazi gendarmes who help the smugglers, so disinfection may enrich the police. What the two have in common is that they serve as sources of evasion, smuggling, bribery, and transgression of the ‘law’, as well as their corollaries: demoralization and perversion of justice. None of these afflictions was necessary even from a hygienic standpoint, especially since no one was careful about them. Through the power of persuasion, those who had come around to the opinion that the whole thing should be taken less seriously ultimately limited the quarantine to one day. But the disinfection of apartments and having to bathe at the bathhouse remained as at the outset.

The following story illustrates just how pointless all the sanitation rules are: I hosted Dir, a refugee from Białystok, in my apartment. One morning he fell ill with typhus and I promptly reported it to the Health Department. I was sure that a wagon would come from the hospital right away and remove the patient from my home. But a week passed and no wagon showed up. In the meantime, the infected person died. Again the Health Department was informed so that the tainted courtyard could be disinfected. Once more a few days passed and no one came. Sometime later, a doctor from the Health Department came by and told us that the apartments bordering on the courtyard wouldn’t be disinfected. However, he ordered the tenants of the building where the patient had died, meaning me, my family, and everyone who had been in contact with us, to go to the bathhouse and present bathing cards. I immediately approached a ‘makher’,[[33]](#footnote-33) paid him 25 złoty for five people, and was exempted from this punishment.[[34]](#footnote-34) As for disinfecting the patient’s room, I did it myself and at my own expense.

That’s what the Nazi-German order amounts to!

The ghetto rests on three things:[[35]](#footnote-35) bribery, bribery, and bribery!!

1. Moreshet Archive, D.2.470, fols. 9, 12–14. This document has been translated from Hebrew. An incomplete English translation of the diary can be found in *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, ed. and trans. Abraham I. Katsh (New York: Macmillan, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chaim Kaplan (1880–1942), Hebrew teacher; trained at the Mir yeshiva; studied pedagogy in Vilnius; founder and later head of a Hebrew-language primary school in Warsaw, 1902; murdered in Treblinka. Kaplan kept a diary from 1933, which ended on 4 August 1942. He gave his writings to Władysław Wójciek, who hid them. The section that describes the period from May 1941 to May 1942 is held in the archive at the Moreshet Mordechai Anielevich Memorial Holocaust Study and Research Center in Israel; the sections from August to Dec. 1939 and from June to July 1942 are held at the USHMM in Washington, D.C. (Collection 2004.405 and 2009.212); and the entries from late Dec. 1939 to April 1941 are held at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (302/218). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hebrew in the original: the eternity of Israel. This is a reference to 1 Samuel 15:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Isaiah 30:29: ‘Ye shall have a song as in the night when a feast is hallowed […].’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Psalms 42:5: ‘How I passed on with the throng, and led them to the house of G-d, with the voice of joy and praise, a multitude keeping holyday.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Exodus 33:7: ‘Now Moses used to take the tent and to pitch it without the camp, afar off from the camp; and he called it the tent of meeting. And it came to pass, that every one that sought HaShem went out unto the tent of meeting, which was without the camp.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lamentations 5:21: ‘Turn Thou us unto Thee, O HaShem, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The synagogue was built between 1898 and 1902, thanks to private funding from the businessman Zalman Nożyk (1846–1903), and given to the Jewish Community after his death. Under German occupation it was used as a stable; the synagogue still exists today. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Jan. 1940 the German authorities banned religious services in what they called Warsaw’s epidemic containment zone. This ban was extended to all of Warsaw in Nov. 1940: *Gazeta Żydowska*, 8 Nov. 1940. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A prayer quorum. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Talmud Bavli; Ta’anit 23a: ‘Either friendship or death, as one how has no friends is better off dead.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Meant here is the area around Grzybowski Square in what was known as the small ghetto, south of Chłodna Street. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Isaiah 30:26: ‘Moreover, the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of the seven days […].’ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Exodus 35:33: ‘And in cutting of stones for setting, and in carving of wood, to work in all manner of skilful workmanship.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Numbers 24:5: ‘How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwellings, O Israel!’ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The writer may be alluding to ‘הכל תלוי במזל ואפילו ספר תורה שבהיכל’ from certain Kabbalistic sources, meaning ‘everything depends on luck, even the Torah scroll in the ark’. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A gabbaiis a person who assists in the running of synagogue services. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Psalms 119:126 (modified quote): ‘It is time for HaShem to work […].’ [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Isaiah 1:6: ‘From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and festering sores […].’ [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The year 1941. According to the Hebrew calendar, the holidays of the year 5702 fell in autumn 1941. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Lamentations 1:10: ‘The adversary hath spread out his hand upon all her treasures […].’ [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The source of this expression is found in Psalms 46:9: ‘Come, behold the works of HaShem, who hath made desolations in the earth.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Talmud Bavli; Chagigah 5b. In the original the idiomatic Aramaic expression literally means ‘a new student on his first day of learning’. The figurative meaning is that the subject of discussion is so simple that anyone would understand it. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. An allusion to Proverbs 23:5: ‘Wilt thou set thine eyes upon it? It is gone […].’ [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The life-threatening typhus infection is transmitted to others through contact with infected lice. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Leviticus 18:3: ‘After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwelt, shall ye not do; and after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you, shall ye not do; neither shall ye walk in their statutes.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Genesis 3:19: ‘[…] for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Leviticus 17:11: ‘For the life of the flesh is in the blood […].’ [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Deuteronomy 28:61: ‘Also every sickness, and every plague, which is not written in the book of this law, them will HaShem bring upon thee, until thou be destroyed.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Joshua 6:1: ‘Now Jericho was straitly shut up because of the children of Israel: none went out, and none came in.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The ‘tortures of Yom Kippur’ are the five main prohibitions on the Day of Atonement. They include eating and drinking, wearing leather shoes, bathing or washing, anointing oneself with perfumes or lotions, and sexual relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ecclesiastes 10:19: ‘A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh glad the life; and money answereth all things.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Yiddish in the original. A *makher* is an influential person, usually paid, who mediates in order to bypass procedures. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. An allusion to the blessing ‘Blessed be (He) who released me from this punishment’.It is customary for one whose son becomes Bar Mitzvah to say this blessing after the boy has read the Torah portion. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. An allusion to Pirkei Avot 1:2: ‘He used to say: The world stands upon three things: the Torah, worship, and deeds of loving kindness.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-35)