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## *Responsa from the Kovno Ghetto*

*For Grades 6-8*

*This lesson plan was developed by Deborah Fripp for the Teach the Shoah Foundation.*

*Objective:* Illuminate difficult issues confronted by Jews in the ghetto.

*Estimated time:* 55 minutes per week, for 3 weeks

*Essential lessons:*

- Orthodox Jews in the Holocaust continued to consult with their Rabbis about issues.
- Rabbis did not always agree on the answers.

*Materials:*

- *Holocaust Responsa in the Kovno Ghetto (1941-1944)* by Ephraim Kaye
- Copies of the sources lists on p18 to 21 and the "Supplementary Material for Q2"
- Copies of student worksheets and/or a white board and markers (or the equivalent)

*Procedure:*

- Introduction to the concepts (20 min on week 1)
  - Introduce the idea of responsa literature, as found in the Introduction on p3-4
  - Describe the historical context of the Kovno Ghetto, as found on p11-14
- Consider one of these dilemmas per week as a class.
  - With a large class, divide the class into three groups. Allow each group to consider one dilemma and then report back to the class.
- Go over the question, when it was asked, and the context in which it was asked. Have the students fill out Student Worksheet 1, or write the information on the board. (10 min)
- Read through the sources and discuss which of these indicate that the answer should be yes vs no. Use Student Worksheet 2 or make a similar table on the board. (20 min)
- Have the students decide what they think the answer should be. (5 min)
- Compare the class' answer to Rabbi Oshry's answer, as found in the book. (10 min)
  - For Question 2, also discuss the answers from other rabbis, found in the Supplementary Material for Q2. Note that rabbis often disagree. (5 to 10 min)

*Notes on staying age-appropriate:*

- Never ask the students to think about what they would do in if they were confronted with these dilemmas. Ask instead what they think the people in the book did.
- While you will need to discuss the risk of death, avoid discussions of mass murder, killing pits, and death camps.



## Supplementary Material for Question 2

Source: *The Echo of the Nazi Holocaust in Rabbinic Literature, Great Britain*  
by Dr. H.J. Zimmels, Ktav Publishing House, 1977, pp. 77-81.

[Also found in footnote 17 on page 31 of *Holocaust Responsa from the Kovno Ghetto* by Ephraim Kaye.]

There are questions in the responsa as to whether a Jew is permitted to obtain a certificate of baptism to save his life. In fact, the holder of such certificates had not been baptized, nor did he declare "his willingness to do so." In different countries (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania) at different times during the war, rabbis were asked the same question: "May a Jew obtain a certificate of baptism to save his life?"

Poland – Rabbi Dr. Jacob Avigdor (Chief Rabbi and av beyt din of Drohobycs and Boryslaw) ... relates that his beyt din had to deal with the question, asked by many religious Jews, whether they were permitted to use documents certifying the holders to be Christians and disguise themselves as Christians...

All of them felt that they were living in completely different conditions and that the law of "better to die than to transgress" would therefore not apply. The law applied when the enemy came and demanded that a Jew transgress the prohibition of idolatry, murder, or immorality, and if that latter should not do so he would be killed. In such a case the Jew must give up his life and refrain from complying with the order of the enemy...

But as far as they were concerned, the matter was quite different. The Germans on no account wanted the Jews to use such certificates, they even prohibited genuine baptism under pain of death.

On the other hand, if a Jew was living in the ghetto and did not rebel and did the work imposed on him – in those early days he was not removed to be killed. But if a Jew was caught having a certificate stating he was [baptized] even at the beginning of the Nazi rule, [he was] immediately killed.

Hence, if after that order had been issued, a Jew acquired such a certificate, his action entailed great self-sacrifice...

How could they, the beyt din, decide that it was forbidden to hold such a certificate? By giving such a ruling, they would have strengthened the decree of the Nazis. (R. Jacob Avigdor, *Heleq Ya-aqov*, III, Mexico, 1956)





## Student Worksheet 2: Arguments

Use this table to write down the arguments for and against this question.

Question:

| Yes, Permitted | No, Prohibited |
|----------------|----------------|
|                |                |