Introduction

In his treatise on resurrection, Moses Maimonides writes: ‘the resurrection of the dead is one of the cornerstones of the Torah ... there is no portion for him that denies that it is part of the Torah of Moses our Teacher.’ Having established the theological legitimacy of resurrection, Maimonides goes on to argue that while resurrection is critical as a theological component of Judaism, it is not the ‘ultimate goal’ of religious faith. For the believer there is no higher hope than the world to come; nothing in faith achieves the ‘bliss beyond which there is none more blissful’ than in the world to come. ‘Corporeal existence’ disappears since God is ‘not corporeal nor a power within a body and, therefore, the level of His existence is the firmest of all.’

Belief in a higher world of non-corporeal bodies became a central tenet of faith during the Holocaust – a faith that acted as a protest against the German vision of wiping out ‘life unworthy of life’ from all existence. What faith, as protest, meant in this context lay in the vision of moving not only to another level or place of ‘existence,’ but the possibility of redemption beyond the suffering of this world. Rabbis taught through this period that death could be understood not as nothingness, but as a moment of the supreme testing of faith. These beliefs were being articulated by rabbis in the ghettos of the East, to make sense of the utter confusion inflicted by the German assault.

For Maimonides, Moses’ injunction was absolute: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.’ Rabbi Shapira took this literally:
obedience and faith to the God of Israel could not be questioned; to doubt faith meant giving a victory to the Germans. While abuse could be relentless, faith constituted an untouchable place within the self. God defined all destiny: the body might suffer brutality, but faith would endure. An ancient Biblical prediction that the Messiah would come in the year 5700 (1940) kept many Jews within the orbit of faith through 1940–41. Signs and their interpretation of the impending coming of the Messiah turned into heated arguments. One Hasidic rabbi preached: ‘When we begin to blow the shofar [ram’s horn], the enemy will be blown away.’

4 A number of signs were found in religious texts, in phrases or placement of letters, pagination. People searched desperately for any textual or experiential event out of the ordinary for clues as to where and when the Messiah would come.

Early in the occupation of Poland, a few rabbis responded violently to Jewish collaboration in the German occupation; a rabbi ordered an informer’s tongue to be cut out. In the Lublin area Jews believed to be informers were drowned in mikvah baths. Ritual practice would take on the form of resistance; for example, walking to the mikvah bath or the ritual slaughterhouses would be a cause for arrest, torture and execution. Warnings had been posted throughout the ghetto: ‘Opening the mikveh or employing it will be punished as sabotage and will be subject to between ten years in prison and death.’

Religious practice, then, could be understood as resistance; whether one fired a gun or immersed the body in a sacred bath, the consequences could be the same.

Children participated in ritual resistance by smuggling kosher-slaughtered meat into the ghettos; they found breaches in ghetto walls, sneaked through entry points or arranged with confederates to receive merchandise. On occasion, children as young as five or six would hide contraband on their bodies, taking great risks at the ghetto gates. Ritual slaughterers themselves incurred risk, since all kosher practices had been banned by the Germans. To be caught in these acts meant certain death. Kosher meat early in the occupation found its way into the ghetto through a variety of conveyances – in trucks belonging to the utilities companies, medical resources, services, and municipal sanitation vehicles. Any driver, Pole or Jew, caught with kosher meat was immediately arrested.