

The Thirteen Questions (Regarding Ritual Purity)

by Rabbi Dovid Novoseller

The following is an excerpt from the Felshtin yizkor book, Felshtin zamlbukh: tsum ondenk fun di felshtiner kdoyshim, J. Baum, editor, New York: First Felshteener Benevolent Association, 1937.

After the pogrom, recuperating after having been severely wounded, I was asked 13 questions regarding ritual purity. The names of those asking the questions and the answers I gave are not important to anyone.

First Question:

"When the Petlurists were coming up to the attic where we were hiding, my brother and I escaped through the chimney and ran away. After the pogrom, we returned and went up to the attic. We found a pile of flesh, hacked and cut to pieces, which could not be recognized as having been a human being. We did not know whether or not it was our father whom we left behind in the attic. Should I bury this flesh near our mother, whom we found murdered on the frozen river?"

Second Question:

"While we were fleeing, the Petlurists grabbed my wife and killed her in the street. Pigs ate her flesh. After the pogrom, with my last bit of strength, I came out of hiding and drove away the pigs. I found a few pieces of flesh far from her body. Should I bury them in her grave?"

Third Question:

"After the pogrom, I found my husband's decapitated body in the outhouse, and I buried him this way. A few days after the pogrom, I had yet to clean the bed and change the linen, when I began to smell a fowl odor. I began cleaning and searching for the source of the

odor when I found my husband's head in a pot covered with feces. Should I bury his impure head in his grave?"

Fourth Question:

"I buried my husband without his feet. I searched and searched for his feet, but to no avail. A few days later, we cleaned the inn, and I found my husband's boots. I looked in the boots and found my husband's feet. Should I bury the boots with his feet in his grave?"

Fifth Question:

"Rabbi! We buried your wife and your two little girls. We found a large piece of flesh from a leg. After examining your wife and daughters, we saw that their legs were intact. Whose is it, and where do we bury it?" I replied, "That flesh is from my own leg. Bury it together with my wife and daughters."

Sixth Question:

"My pure wife was dragged onto the bed, and every time a different soldier ran in. She groaned. Rabbi, I was hiding under the bed. I feel cruel for surviving. Where is the justice of the Torah?"

Seventh Question:

"The village gentiles demanded that the Petlurists burn down the town hall where Jews were hiding. The Petlurists obeyed. As the smoke began to choke us, we broke out a wall and went into another section of the building. Soon the smoke reached us there as well. Our eyes began to tear, and our throats became constricted. We broke through another thin wall and began to jump out of the building. I pulled and pushed away a woman

who wanted to get out before me, and I jumped out. It was quite an ordeal to save ourselves from the soldiers who waited outside to attack us. The woman who I shoved aside burned to death. Please, can you give me an answer?"

Eighth Question:

"How do we bury the individual hands, heads, feet, brains, kidneys and intestines that we gathered from the highway, streets and garbage piles and the burnt bones of the children whom the Petlurists merrily threw into the burning town hall? What do we do with them?"

Ninth Question:

"They stuffed my son's mouth with paper, and he choked to death. Should I bury him with the paper?"

Tenth Question:

"We were eight people hiding in a cellar. My nursing baby was crying loudly. I kept pressing my breast into his mouth, but it did not help. They pleaded with me to keep him quiet, but I could not. I said, 'You take the child and do whatever you want.' They all shouted in unison, 'Heaven forbid, we won't touch the child.' Petlurists soon came into the cellar and murdered everyone, including my child. I am the only one they did not kill. Now Rabbi, my conscience is tormented. I cannot sleep. I am sure that I was the cause of their deaths."

Eleventh Question:

"Seven o'clock in the morning Samosenko gave his pogrom speech to his 800 soldiers saying, 'In

the name of God, whoever lets a Jew bribe him to spare his life is a traitor. We will drown our enemies in Jewish blood and revive our pride! Last night you did what you pleased, now you do Batko [Father] Petlura's will!' My son pulled out his revolver and wanted to shoot Samosenko, but I did not let him do it. Now that this calamity befell our people, I feel that maybe, if I had let my son kill Samosenko, the pogrom would not have happened."

Twelfth Question:

"With my gentile looks and manner of speaking, I resembled a village gentile woman. To my misfortune, I was in Felshtin the night before the pogrom. I dressed like a village gentile, made myself up a little, and went to the main section of town. Twenty Jews were brought there, many of whom I knew, and were violently killed. One was forced to eat salt. Some had their fingers hacked off. Others were laid on the ground. A sofa was placed on top of them and a bunch of them, and a bunch of Petlurist soldiers proceeded to jump up and down on the sofa, singing 'Zakhvatili Shreki' [We conquered Shreki], crushing the poor souls to death. Others had their legs pulled out from their bodies. Others were randomly beaten with whips until they fell dead. Music played and the Petlurists danced. They pulled me into their circular dance. Now, my conscience does not let me rest. Tell me, Rabbi, am I responsible for anything?"

Thirteenth Question:

"At all seven prayer houses, everyone says kaddish, but no one is there to answer 'Amen.' Is this acceptable according to Jewish law?"